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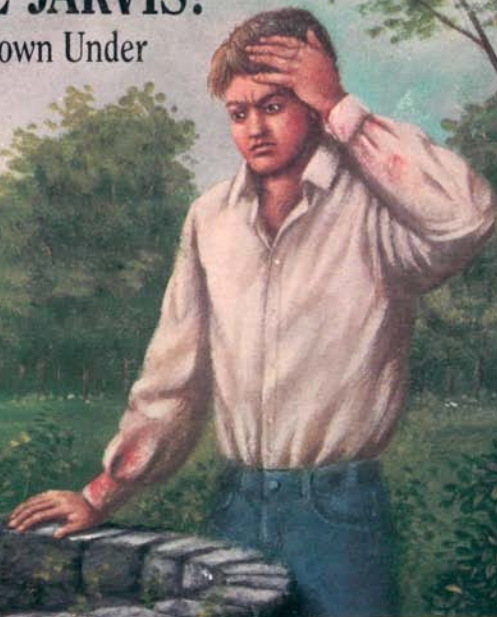
MAGAZINE

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO CROCODILE JARVIS?

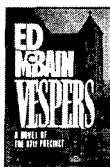
A Dark Tale from Down Under

by Justin
D'Ath

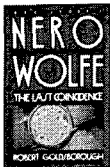
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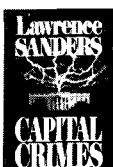
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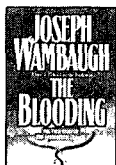
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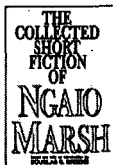
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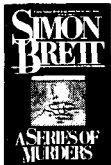
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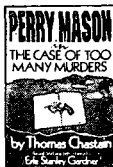
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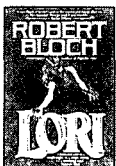
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

An AHMM author has done it again! We're very proud to announce that the winner of the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Short Story of 1989 is "Hawks" by Connie Holt, published in our June 1989 issue. Our congratulations to Ms. Holt for a fine story—and to two more AHMM authors who were nominated for an Edgar for Best Short Story, Robert Halsted and Stephen Wasylyk (see below). This, by the way, is Mr. Wasylyk's second nomination in a row.

The Edgars, as you may have guessed, have been bestowed. As they do annually, the Mystery Writers of America have chosen the best in their view in the mystery genre for 1989; nominees receive scrolls, and winners are presented with ceramic busts of Edgar Allan Poe.

All in this year's lineup follow, with the winners in bold face:

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1989:

"Too Many Crooks" by Donald Westlake (*Playboy*, August)

"Ted Bundy's Father" by Ruth Graviros (*EQMM*, November)

"The Girl and the Gator" by Robert Halsted (AHMM, December)

"Afraid All the Time" by Nancy Pickard (*Sisters in Crime*, Berkley)

"For Loyal Service" by Stephen Wasylyk (AHMM, August)

BEST NOVEL OF 1989:

***Black Cherry Blues* by James L. Burke (Little, Brown)**

Goldilocks by Andrew Coburn (Scribners)

A Question of Guilt by Francis Wyfield (Pocket)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Holly Wallinger**, Managing Editor; **Judy Downer**, Assistant Editor; **Terri Cieczko**, Art Director; **Ron Kuliner**, Associate Art Director; **Nancy Siwinski**, Junior Designer; **Carole Dixon**, Production Director; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Florence Eichin**, Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Elizabeth Beatty**, Circulation Director; **Brian McKeon**, Corporate Business Manager; **Christian Dorbandt**, Newsstand Marketing and Promotion Manager; **Dennis Jones**, Newsstand Operations Manager; **Veena Raghavan**, Director, Special Projects; **Irene Bozoki**, Classified Advertising Director; **A. Bruce Chatterton**, Advertising Director; **Lisa Feerick**, Advertising Services Manager.

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Joel Davis, President and Publisher; **Joe DeFalco**, Vice President, Finance; **Carl Bartee**, Vice President, Manufacturing.

Death of a Joyce Scholar by
Bartholomew Gill (Morrow)
The Booster by Eugene Izzi (St.
Martin's)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMER-
ICAN AUTHOR OF 1989:

The Last Billable Hour by
Susan Wolfe (St. Martin's)
Hide and Seek by Barry Berg
(St. Martin's)
The Story of Annie D. by Susan
Taylor Chehak (Houghton
Mifflin)
The Mother Shadow by Melodie
Johnson Howe (Viking)
Blood Under the Bridge by
Bruce Zimmerman (Harper
& Row)

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL
NOVEL OF 1989:

The Rain by Keith Peterson
(Bantam)
Manhattan Is My Beat by Jef-
fery Wilds Deaver (Bantam)
King of the Hustlers by Eugene
Izzi (Bantam)
Hot Wire by Randy Russell
(Bantam)
A Collection of Photographs by
Deborah Valentine (Ban-
tam)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY
NOVEL OF 1989:

Show Me the Evidence by
Alane Ferguson (Brad-
bury Press)
The Man Who Was Poe by Avi
(Orchard Books)

Fell Back by M. E. Kerr (Harper
& Row)

Remember Me by Christopher
Pike (Archway Paperback)

Sniper by Theodore Taylor
(Harcourt, Brace, Jovanov-
ich)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1989:

*Doc: The Rape of the Town
of Lovell* by Jack Olsen
(Atheneum)

*The Death Shift: The True Story
of Nurse Genene Jones and
the Texas Baby Murders* by
Peter Elkind (Viking)

Murder in Little Egypt by Darcy
O'Brien (Morrow)

*The Blooding: The True Story
of the Narborough Village
Murders* by Joseph Wam-
baugh (Perigord/Morrow)

Wasted: The Preppie Murder by
Linda Wolfe (Simon &
Schuster)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL
STUDY OF 1989:

*The Life of Graham Greene,
Volume I: 1904-1939* by
Norman Sherry (Viking)

*Film Noir: Reflections in a Dark
Mirror* by Bruce Crowther
(Continuum)

*Mysterium and Mystery: The
Clerical Crime Novel* by Wil-
liam David Spencer (UMI
Research Press)

*The Perfect Murder: A Study in
Detection* by David Lehman
(Free Press/Macmillan)

Murder on the Air by Ric Meyers (Mysterious Press)

BEST PLAY OF 1989:

City of Angels, book by Larry Gelbart, music by Cy Coleman, and lyrics by David Zippel

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1989:

Heathers written by Daniel Waters (New World)

Crimes and Misdemeanors written by Woody Allen (Orion)

Licence to Kill written by Richard Maibaum and Michael G. Wilson (United Artists)

Sea of Love written by Richard Price (Universal)

True Believer written by Wesley Strick (Columbia)

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OR MINISERIES OF 1989:

Shannon's Deal by John Sayles (NBC)

Game, Set, and Match adapted from the Len Deighton novels by John Howlett (PBS)

The Hollywood Detective by Christopher Crowe (USA)

Miss Marple: Murder at the Vicarage adapted from the Agatha Christie novel by T. R. Bowen (PBS)

Turn Back the Clock by Lee Hutson and Lindsay Harrison, adapted from an original screenplay by Walter Bullock and a novel by William O'Farrell (NBC)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1989:

"White Noise" (Wiseguy) by David J. Burke and Alfonso Ruggiero, Jr. (CBS)

"Blues for Buder" (B. L. Stryker) by Robert P. Parker and Joan Parker (ABC)

"Investment in Death" (Hunter) by Jerry Jacobius and Nick Gore (NBC)

"Rumpole and the Bubble Reputation" (Rumpole of the Bailey) by John Mortimer (PBS)

"Urine Trouble Now" (L. A. Law) by David E. Kelley, William M. Finkelstein, Michelle Gallery, and Judith Parker (NBC)

On another subject, we especially wanted to mention that we're very pleased to have as the Mystery Classic in this issue a story by the eminent Czech writer, Karel Čapek, in its first English translation. "Footprints" is included in a volume of Čapek stories, *Toward the Radical Center: A Karel Čapek Reader*, published this spring by Catbird Press to celebrate the centennial of Čapek's birth. It is edited by Peter Kussi, the preeminent Czech translator in this country.

Čapek is best known for his play, *R.U.R.*, and in it for the first use of the word "robot." He died in 1938.

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Whatever Happened to Crocodile Jarvis?

by Justin
D'Ath



Illustration by Mark Fresh

I had never liked that Jarvis kid.

"Jeez, Robin, do we have to bring him?"

Robin pushed in the clutch and hit the anchors hard. I nearly bumped my head on the windscreen. I knew he had done it on purpose; we were out of sight of both houses, and Robin liked to show off a bit. He wasn't old enough yet to have a license, but our Old Man let him drive the ute around so long as he didn't go anywhere near the main road. A cloud of our own dust caught up with us and turned everything red. I cranked my winder-knob flat-out to get the window closed before too much of the stuff got inside.

"He's got nobody else to knock round with, Marty."

Robin is my big brother. It was all very well for him. He was hardly ever on the station these days. He didn't have to put up with Jarvis hanging round all the time like a bad smell. The only thing Robin cared about was that sappy girlfriend of his. And she just happened to be Jarvis's big sister, didn't she?

"Well, I don't like him." I had to shout to make myself heard above the roar of the motor. Robin had the idle turned up way too high. "He's a silly showoff."

"Hey, keep it down!" Robin said out of one side of his mouth so Jarvis wouldn't hear.

The little runt had caught up with us already. He must have really come belting after us as soon as the ute started to slow down. He was puffing like a steam train.

Robin opened his window a crack.

"Doin' anything this afternoon, Crocky?"

Jarvis shook his head. His real name was Adrian, but he liked to be called Croc. I was not sure why—after Crocodile Dundee, most probably. I had never been interested enough to find out.

Robin said, "Marty and I are going out to knock over a few pigs. Like to come?"

It was a pretty dumb question. Jarvis's eyes went big as twenty-cent pieces. "You bet!"

"Let him in your side, Marty."

"He can go in the back," I said. The rifles and knives and ammunition took up most of the middle of the seat. You can bet your bottom dollar I wasn't going to let that wimp Jarvis sit on my knee.

"All right," Robin grumbled. He didn't like me going against what he said, but he saw it was the best thing. What it meant was he couldn't skid round corners or go over bumps so fast any more. If he did, our passen-

ger would probably get bounced right out of the back. Not that that would have been any great loss to the human race, I thought. But it wouldn't have made Big Brother too popular with that prissy Beverly Jarvis, and that was all Robin was worried about. I hated it how he drove like a maniac, though.

"Hop up in the back, Crocky," Robin said.

It took us nearly half an hour to get out to Watson's Dam. Normally it would have taken only about twenty minutes with Robin playing Alain Prost like he used to. I began to feel less sore at Jarvis for coming along. And every time we pulled up in front of a gate, Jarvis was off the back of the ute in a flash, dragging the thing open for us. Usually that was my job. Robin stopped the ute halfway through the last gate and waved to Jarvis to get back on.

"Don't bother closing this one, Crocky—there isn't a beast for twenty miles."

Only pigs, I thought. I began to get an excited, trembly feeling inside. I grabbed the waterbag off the floor. My mouth was a bit dry already.

We had driven only about a mile into the paddock before Robin poked the ute under the low wattle and switched the engine off. I opened my door and slid out, dragging the .22.

Robin growled. "Hey, careful where you point that thing!"

"It isn't loaded."

"Well," says Robin, "lots of people are dead from guns that weren't loaded." He was beginning to sound like the Old Man.

Jarvis had already jumped off my side of the ute. He pulled a real smart-aleck face when he saw the .22.

"That's only a peashooter."

"So?" I said, taking a bead on an imaginary animal.

"I thought we were after pigs."

"This is all right for pigs. You just have to know the right place to hit them."

"Bet you never even shot one, Adams."

"I've shot plenty," I bragged. I felt like shooting Jarvis.

"Bet you haven't really."

"What would you know, Adrian?" I knew he hated being called that. "They don't teach you about guns on *Play School*, do they?"

"Hey, knock it off, you two," Robin said from the other side of the car. I could hear him pushing slugs into the magazine of the .303. "You'll scare all the pigs away."

Jarvis gave me a dirty look, then went round to Robin's side of the ute. I bent in and got the packet of .22 bullets out of the glovebox.

"That's a nice Lee Enfield you've got there," I heard him

say to Robin. "I see you've given it a free-floating barrel." Smart little prick!

We set off on foot towards the dam. It was only about a mile. Robin went in front, then me, then Jarvis. I noticed Jarvis was wearing Robin's ammunition belt with the big bowie knife hanging in its sheath at the back. It looked almost as big as him. I remember thinking, I bet that gives you a real thrill, Croc. He probably thought he really was Crocodile Dundee.

Poor little bastard.

It's mostly open country all around Watson's Dam. The scrub starts about a hundred yards out. There is a creek that runs into it—comes all the way from the artesian bore on Mr. Jarvis's property three miles away. Without the water we got from the Jarvises, Dad reckoned we could run only about half the number of cattle we did. We used the creek that day to sneak up on the dam, walking crouched down along the channel. There was no wind. If there were any pigs at the dam, there was no way they were going to smell us or see us coming.

Flies were buzzing about, and Robin's and my boots made a slop-suck in the mud at the edge of the water. Jarvis had sneakers on and was walking higher up on the bank where it

was dry. The dam was somewhere up ahead, but I couldn't see it. I couldn't even see the trees.

I kept my head down. It felt good to be carrying a rifle. I had lied to Jarvis; I had never shot a pig. Robin and I had come out after them before, but this was the first time I'd been allowed to bring my own gun. Usually I just tagged along like Jarvis was doing today. I felt a lot older than Jarvis. I was glad he was there to see me hunting pigs.

My palms were sweaty as we stalked up on the dam. There might be pigs there, but they still wouldn't know we were coming for them. *Look out, pigs! You better start saying your prayers, pigs!* It was like going to a war. I couldn't have worked up a spit for all the tea in China.

Jarvis kept just behind me. I didn't really mind having him along any more. We were both thirteen, but sometimes you'd think he was just a kid from the way he acted. Still, what could you expect—him the only boy in a family of seven kids. Must have been rough, though—all those silly, giggly girls. Crocodile Jarvis. I felt a bit mean for teasing him about *Play School* back there.

Robin made a sign for us to stop. We were right up at the

trees. He squatted down and beckoned for me and Crocky to come up close.

"We'll circle our way round to the bottom end," he whispered. "If there's any here, they'll be holed up in the thick stuff this time of day."

We followed him out of the creek and in among the trees. The bush was fairly open. We had to creep from tree to tree. At one stage we flushed out a wallaby from a clump of brigalow. It whoofed and thump-thumped off ahead of us, leaving me wondering what was noisiest, the wallaby or my bumping heart. I had nearly fired when the stupid thing broke cover.

"I hope that safety catch is on," Robin nagged.

"Course it is," I said.

Crocky flashed me a little smile. The wallaby had given him a fright, too.

We continued on. Robin still led the way, but I walked a little to one side of him now, to get a clear shot if any pigs suddenly jumped up. We were getting down towards the end of the dam, and the trees were becoming quite thick. They were lower, too; we had to bend down to push underneath some of them. I could see a bank of reeds ahead. We crossed a boggy area that had been all ploughed up by rooting pigs. It looked as

though a bomb had hit it. Robin pointed to a fresh hoofprint in the mud. He turned to me and nodded. It meant the pigs were there. Crocky kept close to me. I think he was a bit scared. I know I was—and I had a rifle.

Something moved among the reeds. We couldn't see it, only the tops of the reeds jiggling a bit, like when there's a wind. But there wasn't any wind. I aimed my rifle at the place. Nothing came out. I knew better than to fire at something I couldn't see, but I wanted to. If Robin hadn't been there, I'd have fired, all right. Perhaps if I had, everything wouldn't have gone wrong like it did. If I had just fired blindly into the reeds old Crocky might still be alive today. I wish I had, but I didn't. Instead, I crept up beside Robin. He was kneeling in the mud, peering into the reeds. His rifle was half raised. He saw me and shook his head and lifted a couple of fingers off the stock of the .303 as if to say, "Hang on a moment." Crocky slid up next to me. He had the bowie knife out of its sheath.

I didn't even see them come out. One moment nothing was there, and the next four pigs were trotting straight towards us. There were more behind them. They didn't know we were there.

"Take the brown one," Robin

said, and the .303 boomed almost at the same moment.

The leading pig flopped onto its side, legs kicking madly. I heard Robin reloading. The brown one, I repeated to myself as my own rifle came up. They were only about fifteen feet away. The brown one. But I fired at the first one that appeared in my sights—I don't remember *what*, color it was. Beside me, the .303 boomed again. My ears rang. I fumbled another round into the breech, raised the .22, and fired again. *Boom* went Robin's rifle. There were pigs rushing everywhere. Two were down. Another was charging in circles blowing red bubbles out of its mouth. Robin shot a half-grown boar. My fingers fumbled so badly I dropped two bullets into the mud before I managed to reload again. Crocky had run forward. He was on top of the wounded pig, leaning on the handle of the bowie knife; the knife itself was sticking out of the animal's side like it was growing there. The pig kicked and squealed underneath him. I saw a retreating ginger and black pig; without thinking, I lifted the rifle and shot at it. There were pigs lying everywhere. Some of them were still kicking. We could hear others crashing away through the undergrowth.

"Come on!" said Robin.

Already he was halfway to the reeds. Crocky leapt up with his knife. His pig was dead. There was blood all over the front of his jeans. He grinned at me. We both charged after Robin.

I heard Robin fire. He was somewhere ahead of me in the reeds. Suddenly a pig dashed out of cover not ten feet away. It saw me and slewed sideways. I shot it. It fell, but then it got up again. I raced after it. The mud sucked at my feet. I saw a smear of blood on some reeds and then there was a pig lying on its side looking at me. It was all red down its flank. I flung up my rifle and pulled the trigger. Click. I had forgotten to reload. Not far away, the .303 crashed. My pig scrambled to its feet and bounded farther into the thicket. Somewhere a pig was screaming. I closed the breech of the .22. A smaller pig crossed in front of me. Flinging the rifle up, I sent a bullet after it. I reloaded. *Boom* went the .303. My ears were ringing. The little pig had disappeared. I followed the wounded one. There was quite a blood trail. Suddenly there it was, standing side on, watching me. I fired quickly. The pig turned and started stumbling towards me; I couldn't believe it. I began to back away. My fingers searched frantically through my pocket

for another bullet. The pig walked towards me. It wasn't charging, or even running—it was just walking towards me as if I was another pig or something. I can't remember if I was frightened or not; I guess I was too excited to be frightened. I had a bullet halfway into the breech, sort of stuck there. My fingers wouldn't work properly. The pig came toward me, then it veered off at the last moment and took several more paces before finally collapsing. I bent over and shot it behind the ear the way I had seen Robin do to finish them off.

There was no more shooting. I looked for more pigs. Nothing moved. The dead pig lay in the mud at my feet. A blowfly buzzed.

"Martin?"

That was Robin.

"Over here," I called. My voice sounded funny.

I heard him come stomping through the mud. Reeds rattled. He appeared, grinning, came over and looked at my pig.

"Nice going, Marty."

It was hard to talk. I worked some spit into my mouth. "How many did you get?"

"Don't know," he said. Then he laughed and clapped me on the back. "Hell, it was like World War III!"

We both laughed. But it felt sort of wrong to be laughing.

Blowflies were already beginning to work on the red pig at our feet. It was red from its own blood. A single eye looked up at us from between pink, scaly lids. Poor bloody pig! Five minutes ago you were a healthy wild sow. We had to kill them, though—they ruined the Old Man's crops.

"Where's Crocky?"

"I don't know. Hey, check him out with that knife!"

"Crocky the wild man," Robin said, smiling. "You'd never think it, would you?"

"Crocky!" he called.

He waited. He called again.

"God knows where he's got to," I said. I felt a little uneasy.

"Probably still chasing them." Robin tried to make a joke out of it.

We stood listening to the silence.

"How far could he have gone?"

We both called this time: "Cro-o-ckeeeee!"

"Probably just playing a joke on us," I suggested. I really wanted to believe it. Somehow, old Crocky didn't seem the type for jokes, though.

Flies buzzed in the heat.

"Crocky!" I shouted. My throat was dry, and it hurt to have to shout. "Crocky, where the hell are you?"

But he couldn't hear me. I think we both knew he couldn't hear us calling.

"We'd better look for him," said Robin. His voice sounded a bit dry, too. I was beginning to feel scared.

"What if one of those pigs got him?"

"There was only that one big boar," Robin was saying as he led the way back through the reeds, "and I nailed him with my first shot."

He stopped suddenly and I almost bumped into him. I saw him drop the .303.

"Hey, Robin, what—"

It was Crocky. He was lying flat on his face in the mud. Robin bent down and slowly rolled him over.

"Jesus!" he whispered.

Crocky's face was all brown with mud. I saw his teeth through the mud. His eyes were open and there was mud on them, too; that was the most horrible thing—the mud on Crocky's eyes. I felt like I was going to be sick.

"Did a pig get him?" I asked. *Dear Jesus, I prayed, please make it be a pig that got him.*

Robin lifted back Crocky's collar. There was mud underneath, but you couldn't miss the hole. It was only a very small hole. A .303 doesn't make a hole that little.

Who knows which of my shots hit him. It had been pretty frantic in there, guns going off all over the show and pigs crashing

in and out of the reeds like dodge'em cars. It was every man for himself. If only Crocky had stuck close by me and not gone running off on his own pretending he was Crocodile Dundee.

I said, "I killed him!" only it didn't sound like me. I closed my eyes. I felt dizzy. I think I wanted to wake up and make it all just be a dream. But when I opened my eyes again, there was poor Crocky lying there in the mud. The bowie knife was still in his hand.

Robin was looking up at me. He had a funny look on his face.

"Give me your rifle, Marty."

I handed it to him. I wondered what he was going to do. I thought maybe he was going to throw it away or something. I didn't care. It was only the week before that I had gotten it for my birthday. I wished we were back at my birthday again. Crocky was alive then. If only you could turn time backwards. Even half an hour backwards would have been enough. I could still see a picture of old Crocky grinning at me after that wal-laby put the wind up us back there. How long ago was that? Ten minutes, maybe. Only ten minutes ago Crocky was right there beside me, grinning at me. How *could* he be dead now?

"I'll need a bullet." Robin held out his hand.

I gave him one. I wasn't even thinking. I tried not to look at Crocky.

Robin loaded the .22. He cocked it and put the muzzle down against Crocky's shirt above where the heart was. I just watched him do it. The shot made hardly any noise at all. Crocky didn't move; only the hand that held the bowie knife came slowly open.

I turned sideways and was sick in the mud. After that I cried for a long time.

Robin had his arm round me. I don't know how long I'd been crying. We weren't in the reeds any more. I couldn't remember coming out, though. Crocky lay on the ground with Robin's shirt covering his head like they do on TV when someone's dead. The two rifles were leaning against a tree. There was a dead pig with its legs sticking straight out. A heron flew kraa-kraa-kraa just above the tops of the trees.

All I could think of was how Robin had placed the barrel of my rifle on Crocky's chest and—

"What—did—you—do—it—for?" It was hard for me to speak.

"He might have been suffering."

"But—but—" I tried again. "Wasn't he dead?"

"Probably," said Robin. "He was as good as dead, anyway."

I couldn't believe it. My brother had finished Crocky off the same as if he was just a wounded pig. "But if he was alive, you m-murdered him!"

"No," Robin said very softly, "nobody murdered him. It was an accident."

"They won't believe it. When they see two bullet holes they won't believe it was an accident."

"They aren't going to know. They won't ever find the body, so they won't know anything about what happened, will they?"

Slowly it dawned on me what he meant. As far as everyone else knew, Crocky hadn't even come out shooting with us that day. Nobody would have seen us stop and give him a lift back there on MacCasker's Road. "We have to take him back, Robin."

He stood away from me a little. He looked very white without his shirt on. I noticed he was wearing his belt and sheath again. The bowie knife was back in its sheath.

"We don't have to take him back, Martin. You don't want to go to jail, do you?"

"They don't put kids in jail."

"They'd stick us in one of those detention places. It's as good as being in jail."

"But it was an accident!"

"That's right. So why should we be punished for it?" Robin asked.

I didn't know. All I knew was that when someone got shot you had to report it to the police. That was the law.

"Listen," Robin said, "he's dead. There's nothing we can do about it. And even if we did get punished for it, that's not going to help old Crocky, is it?"

Nothing was going to help old Crocky now. Only God could help him now.

"He should have a funeral."

"Marty, he never went to church in his life."

"I don't care. Everyone should have a funeral."

Robin said, "It'll be our funeral if we take him back."

"Why did you have to shoot him again?"

"You little bastard! Who the hell shot him in the first place?"

For a minute I thought he was going to hit me. Then he said more quietly, "It was the only thing to do, Martin. Nobody really liked him anyway."

Did he mean he actually *wanted* Crocky dead? There was a look on his face that made me scared to ask. For a minute I even thought he was going to break down. I couldn't remember Robin's ever crying. He was three years older than me. I had always looked up to him and tried to be like him, except for

the way he drove Dad's old ute.

"What are we going to do with him?"

"You know the old stone place . . ."

He didn't have to say any more. I understood straight away how he intended getting rid of Crocky's body.

"It's a long way away . . ."

"So?" Robin said. "We've got the ute, haven't we?"

I had to stay with Crocky while Robin went for the ute. I wanted to go with him, but Robin said someone had to stay and mind the body. I didn't know what I was supposed to be minding it from, though. It hardly seemed likely any pigs would come back. Dingoes, perhaps—or goannas. At any rate, it was spooky waiting there in the bush with only poor dead Crocky for company.

After Robin had gone, I went over to him and lifted the shirt. It didn't look much like Crocky with that mud all over his face. I opened the collar of his shirt. My fingers were shaking. The hole was so tiny. It seemed strange that such a small hole could kill you. There wasn't even any blood to speak of, just a little bit near the hole itself. Why did Robin have to shoot him again? To finish him off? Or was he dead already? *Nobody really liked him anyway.*

It sent a shiver down my back.

As I crouched there, a blowfly came and landed on Crocky's nose. I swore at it and swatted it angrily away. Then I started blubbering again. But I was over it by the time I heard the ute pull up at the edge of the trees.

Robin carried him out to the ute. Crocky wasn't heavy. It was strange: he seemed even smaller after he died. I followed behind carrying the rifles. The shirt fell off Crocky's head and I picked it up. Robin kept going. Crocky's mouth was open. His head bumped up and down as Robin walked. I stopped and retched, but I couldn't be sick any more.

It must have taken about an hour to get to the old stone place. We took the back tracks. Robin drove very slowly. When we came to the first gate, it was open the way Crocky had left it. That was enough to start me off crying again. All the other gates were closed. I had to open and close them myself. I tried not to look in the back of the ute each time Robin drove through a gate and then waited for me to close it behind him. We didn't talk at all during the whole trip.

The old stone place was built by our great-grandfather. It hadn't been lived in for over fifty years. There wasn't much

left of it. Nobody went there any more. The well is up the back in the middle of a tangle of blackberries. Only Robin and me, and maybe the Old Man, knew that the shaft was there. Someone—Granddad, probably—had covered it with sleepers and old sheets of corrugated iron, and now the blackberries had grown right over the top of that. It took a bit of work and lots of blackberry scratches to open up one corner of the hole. I pitched an old horseshoe in and heard the faraway, echoey splash.

"I don't think we should put him down there."

"We've got to, Martin."

"He should have a proper funeral."

"They'll hold a memorial service," Robin told me. "That's as good as a funeral."

I didn't really believe him.

We walked back down to where he had parked the ute.

"Will he still go to heaven?"

I saw Robin fighting to keep from crying. "'Course he will."

"I want to clean his face," I said.

"All right," Robin said. He looked at his watch. "But we better not be too long."

I got the waterbag and wet a corner of Robin's shirt. I cleaned Crocky's face with it. Robin stood behind me, watching.

"It's funny," he whispered,

"his face like that: he looks a lot like Beverly."

Then we carried him up to the well and slid him into the hole. It was hard getting him through all those blackberries. I tried not to hear the splash. Robin took his bowie knife from its sheath, looked at it for a moment, then dropped it down after Crocky, handle first. I wanted to put something in, too, but there was nothing I could give. We pulled the sleepers and iron back into place. Some of the iron was so old it broke in our hands. Robin arranged a few blackberry vines across the top. It looked like just a pile of old overgrown rubbish. I wished we could have put a cross up.

We both stood there beside Crocky's grave.

"I'm going to pray for him," I promised, "every night before I go to sleep for the rest of my life."

As we drove away, Robin said, "We'll go back and pick up one of those pigs."

"Why?" I didn't ever want to go near Watson's Dam again.

"Because of the blood in the back. Dad will wonder where it came from otherwise."

Robin thought of everything. Crocky had bled a bit on the drive over. Taking a dead pig home would account for any

blood in the back of the ute—and on us, too, for that matter. I wanted to spend about a week under the shower.

We went back to the place and dragged one of the pigs out to the ute. First we started to drag Robin's big boar, but it was too heavy, so we got one of the smaller ones. It was the half-grown boar Crocky had finished off with Robin's knife. We heaved it up onto the ute and got the tailgate closed behind it. Already there was blood coming out of it, covering Crocky's blood in the ute. A lot of its blood was on our clothes too, from lifting it. Robin rubbed his shirt in some of the blood and chucked it in the back with the rifles and the dead pig. I think he would have liked to throw it away, but Mum would ask where it was if he did.

We drove home very slowly. I still hated opening and closing the gates. Each time we stopped, I could see Crocky leaping off the back and doing it before I got a chance to. We should have taken it in turns, really—it wasn't fair that I had let him do them all. Poor old Crocky. He had always been a bit of a pain the way he acted and that, but he was nice enough underneath. I knew I would have hated to have six giggling sisters. Well, they wouldn't be giggling tonight.

"For chrissake stop that sniveling before we get home!" Robin growled.

The Old Man was up on the verandah reading the Saturday paper when we drove up to the house.

"Get any?" he called over the rail. He didn't sound suspicious at all. I don't know why I expected him to be suspicious.

"Ran into a mob near Watson's," Robin said. "Brought one home for the dogs."

The Old Man folded his paper and stood up. He came down the stairs in his socks.

"That the best you could do?" he ribbed us.

Robin said, "We got a monster boar, but it was too heavy to drag out to the ute."

Dad smiled like it was just a fisherman's story. He looked at me. "How did the new peashooter perform, Buck?"

Something flipped over inside me. Peashooter. Crocky had called it that.

"Okay," I said. I bent quickly to pat Sam and Rusty. They sniffed at my dirty fingers, their tails going like mad. They could probably smell Crocky's blood on them. I jerked my hands away like a town kid that's scared he's going to get bitten. Jeez, I needed that shower.

"Nice going, boys," Dad said. "But you can't feed pig to the

dogs; thought you knew that, Rob." He scratched Rusty's head. "You'll have to dump it in the offal pit," he said. "I'll keep the dogs tied tonight. And then you can give the ute a good wash-down."

"By the way," he added, halfway back up the steps, "you didn't happen to see young Adrian anywhere along the road, did you?"

"No," Robin and I said together.

Dad looked at us. He said, "Beverly was over half an hour ago. Apparently he didn't appear for lunch."

"Maybe he's run away from home," I suggested. Robin and I had been working on a story on the way back.

The Old Man took the bait. "Why do you say that, Buck?"

I shrugged. "I'd run away from home if I had six sisters."

Dad laughed, but as he went up onto the verandah I could see he was thinking about what I'd said. I felt sort of dirty inside for tricking him.

Robin and I dumped the pig up the back, then we washed the ute. I don't think it had ever been so clean since it was new. After that I went inside and had a shower. I used up all the hot water. Robin was waiting to go in when I came out. I thought he would be really mad at me about the hot water, but he

didn't say anything. He must have had a cold shower. When he came into the bedroom to get dressed, his skin was all pink from scrubbing.

Beverly came over later in the afternoon and asked if we had seen Adrian. Robin said we hadn't. After she had gone he went into the toilet and stayed there for a long time. I helped Mum peel some apples for a strudel she was making for tea. Then I vacuumed the lounge.

Mum smiled and said, "I'm going to have to let you go shooting more often, Martin."

I just grinned and kept working. But as soon as I was finished I went outside and got my bike and rode down to see the horses. A horse doesn't mind when you cry.

Teatime was the hardest. I didn't feel like eating at all, and I don't think Robin did, either. Mum had cooked a roast. When Dad caried it, I couldn't help thinking of poor Crocky lying there with mud on his eyes. It almost made me sick to eat. Then there was the strudel. I got through it somehow, and then had a second helping so Mum and Dad wouldn't think anything was wrong. All I wanted to do was run outside and throw up. It was the worst meal of my life.

When Robin and I were doing the dishes, I heard a knock on

the door. It was Mr. Jarvis. He and Mum talked for a while at the door, then they went into the lounge and we could hear the Old Man talking, too. We couldn't hear what they were saying, though. Then Dad came into the kitchen and asked us if we knew anything about Adrian running away. I said I didn't. Robin kept washing the dishes.

"Buck, are you sure he's never said anything to you about wanting to run away?" Dad asked me.

I looked down at the plate I had been drying.

"I promised I wouldn't tell." It was what Robin and I had worked out I should say.

Dad said, "Listen, Martin—" he only ever called me Martin when it was serious, or when I was in trouble or something—"sometimes we have to break our promises. If Adrian said anything to you about running away, if he said anything at all about it, I want you to tell me now. It doesn't matter if you promised to keep quiet; this is more important. His parents are very worried about him."

I could see Mr. Jarvis and Mum listening in the background. I fiddled with the tea towel.

"Yesterday on the way home from school he said he was going to run away. He made me

promise not to say anything. I didn't really think he was going to, though," I added. It was a good act, but I felt really rotten about it.

"Did he say where he was going?" Mr. Jarvis wanted to know.

I shook my head. I felt sorry for Mr. Jarvis. "He didn't say where. He just said he was going to run away. I didn't think he really would, Mr. Jarvis—I thought it was just showing off."

They all looked very serious. Mr. Jarvis said, "Well, thank you, Martin, for telling the truth. I'm sure Adrian won't hold it against you that you had to break your promise. It's for his own good."

Dad and Mr. Jarvis went back outside. Later, Sergeant Hill from Roma came and I had to tell him my story, too. I knew God was never going to forgive me.

That was nearly two years ago now. In all that time Robin and I haven't breathed a word of what really happened to anyone. Robin left home this year and works for an interstate trucking company; I don't think he sees Beverly any more, or even writes to her. I've kept my promise, though: every night before going to sleep I say a

prayer for Crocky.

But what's the use of prayers, I ask myself sometimes. Crocky's dead; he'll never come back.

I guess everyone has gotten to accept that now.

Three months ago the Jarvises sold everything and moved down to the city. It was sad to see them go, but sort of a relief, too. Unfortunately, the relief didn't last very long.

The Jarvises' station is now owned by a Mr. Owen Wakelin. From somewhere down south, Wakelin has oodles of money and big ideas; he plans to expand and turn the property into a cattle stud. He wants to buy us out and amalgamate the two stations. In the first four weeks he was here, our new neighbor made the Old Man three offers for our place, but Dad won't sell.

Now Wakelin is getting rough. He's blocked the channel from his artesian bore so that we no longer get his runoff water. It's midsummer and already Watson's Dam is nearly three-quarters empty. And at this time of year it can go months without raining.

"We'll have to accept," I heard Mum saying to the Old Man a week ago. "After all, his last offer *was* very generous."

"I'm not selling," Dad said, "for any price."

"But the cattle can't go with-

out water," Mum pleaded.

The Old Man just smiled. "I know that," he said mildly.

I could tell from his tone of voice that he had something in mind. But it was only this morning, when a dilapidated old truck turned into our gateway, that I realized what it was. Luckily I was the only one home at the time.

"Your father around someplace, son?" asked the man from the truck with the drilling rig on the back.

"He's gone to town," I told him. "Won't be back till tonight."

The man pushed his Akubra farther back on his head. "Perhaps you can help us, then. Your dad sent for us—wants us to look at an old well."

"Old well?" I said stupidly.

"That's right. We're a water exploration company. Your father contracted us to reopen an old, disused well for him." He frowned. "We *have* come to

the right place, haven't we? Your name *is* Adams?"

"No," I lied. "There's no one in the district called Adams."

The man looked puzzled. "Well, that *is* strange."

He turned and walked back to the truck, where he spent several minutes in conference with his companion. Finally he came strolling slowly back.

"Beats me," he shrugged. "Some sort of foul-up back at the office, I guess. Can I use your phone?"

"It's out of order," I lied.

He nodded, and slapped at the flies. "Well," he said finally, "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

He turned to go.

"Excuse me?" I called after him. "Would you be able to give me a lift?"

"Where to?" he asked.

Anywhere, I thought. Wherever Crocky Jarvis was meant to have run off to.

"Just to the bus station in town," I said.

Two Lunchdates with Destiny

by Arthur Porges



As he left the drab, noisy office, Paul Greenwood was still undecided about where to have lunch. The matter was disproportionately important to him, since the noon break in his tedious routine was the one delectable mountain rising from the dreary flatland of his workday.

He was a short man whose narrow shoulders, spindly neck, wide butt, and sallow skin with many liver spots made him resemble a giant, overripe pear. He walked slowly, with the shuffling, toes-out gait of the sedentary; there was no spring in his step, and rarely any spring in his heart. He had lit-

tle hair, less ambition, an atrophied ego, and, he was certain, no future in his job of senior clerk. After forty-three undistinguished years in the world, dead stop, wheels not even spinning.

But it was a fine day, he felt, looking about him appreciatively. The sun was strong but not oppressive, in perfect tune with April. For now, the cruel month seemed almost kind. Even the air had an invigorating chill with a vinous tang very congenial to his nose.

As he came to the busy corner of Forest and Lighthouse streets, the question of lunch was still unanswered. Clam chowder, a cheeseburger, and maybe chocolate cream pie at Flo's Cafe, or a big bowl of tongue-searing chili at El Matador? He licked his lips, feeling a surge of hunger. Ever a greedy eater, he had always found that food was truly far more than a necessity; it was a vital part of what little pleasure he got from life.

As in so many of our daily affairs, the matter was decided by a seemingly trivial event: the traffic signal had just turned red, and rather than waiting for a change back to green, Greenwood simply went with the flow, turned right, and headed for Flo's. He was actually relieved to have the choice made for him, being somewhat in the position of Buridan's Ass in the

fable, unable to choose between two bundles of hay equidistant from it. (Actually, modern exegetes insist, it was a dog, and the food meat.) Paul, however, was not very decisive but was not about to starve to death like the French schoolman's irresolute beast.

He had just come to the bank in the middle of the block when there were screams from inside followed by the sound of gunfire, and two men ran out. Both were armed with automatics, and one bore a large paper bag, obviously full of cash. Paul was directly in their path, and the bigger felon reacted quickly. He rammed the muzzle of his gun into Greenwood's ribs and said, "Move, you! Into the car!"

Only a pair of bumbling losers, far out of their criminal depth, would have picked so conspicuous a getaway car—it was a vintage Daimler—but they had been impressed by its appearance, very suggestive of great speed and power. And it had been easy to steal, parked on a quiet street. The timing was perfect, too; no report of the theft could be circulated before the robbery was under way, if then.

Paul had never been a marvel of mental agility, and now he hardly realized what was happening so fast and without any warning. Only when shoved violently into the back seat of

the huge black vehicle did he begin to understand in a confused way that he was hostage to a couple of dangerous criminals. The wailing siren of a police cruiser, which had been at the far end of his consciousness, suddenly became very loud, and the man at the Daimler's wheel looked back at it, his stubbled face pale and damp.

"Y-you won't kill me," Paul pled through dry lips. "You'll let me go, won't you?"

"Shut up," said the man next to him in the back seat, almost absently, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

"He knows us," the driver said tensely.

"So does half the damn bank, stupid! First you let your mask slip, then you hadda take that shot at the guard."

"He was makin' a move, wasn't he?"

"Hell, the old guy was just nervous." He looked back at the police car, which had been joined by several others. "See, they ain't shootin'; it's just like I told ya—they'll never fire with him here."

"So they ain't shootin' yet," was the sour rejoinder. "How do we shake them—and when? Jeez, half the county must be after us by now."

"We'll get our chance; I'll think of something. Just drive—not so damn fast; you could kill us first!—and play it cool."

They did, indeed, get past the initial roadblock. The police tried a bluff, but when they saw the gun pressed against Greenwood's head, they reluctantly pulled back, leaving the street clear.

At the next one, though, things were better organized. There were a lot more cops, and one with a bullhorn who boomed, "You can't get away. Release your hostage, drop those weapons, and come out—slowly—with your hands on your heads." The distorted words, buzzing with overtones, echoed from the embankment.

"Maybe we'd better quit," the man in front said, a distinct quaver in his voice.

"You're still a gutless wonder," his partner said. "We've got over ninety thousand here, maybe more. Damned if I'll give it up now and spend twenty years in stir. No way! They gotta be bluffin'—don't you watch TV? They got strict orders never to shoot when there's a hostage in danger." He jabbed Paul again with the gun. "We're safe with him, so we can wait for a break."

He was tragically wrong in this case. Up on the embankment was a sharpshooter with a high-powered rifle, and finding one of the felons in his telescopic sight, he opted, as his orders allowed, for a clean shot well clear of Greenwood. His

error was essentially one of human physiology: when the .30 caliber slug shattered the spine of the man next to Paul, his whole body convulsed from the shock, his finger closed on the trigger, and Greenwood heard a tremendous boom, but felt nothing. He merely saw a scarlet mist that instantly darkened and enveloped him. Then he fell headlong into a final night.

Paul Greenwood's first lunch with Destiny was over.

When he came to the corner of Forest and Lighthouse, Paul Greenwood was still mentally debating the question, cheeseburger or chili? But the signal had just turned green, so he crossed the street instead of turning right towards Flo's, and headed for El Matador, unaware that a bank robbery was in progress only two blocks away.

Entering the little restaurant with ostentatiously Spanish ambiance, he was pleased to get his favorite counter stool near the big picture window. He liked to watch the people passing while he ate, although as a devout trencherman, the food was the paramount joy to him. There were few men going by he didn't envy. Certainly he resented the muscular young ones with their confident, vig-

orous strides, but he also peered wistfully at those his own age, debonair, distinguished, and wearing well-cut, expensive clothes. Paul's suit was old and baggy, with a seat worn thin that shone—a deskworker's bottom, he ruefully thought sometimes.

Most of all he envied those men accompanied by lovely young women with long hair, tanned, clear skins, and a fluid grace of movement. He was himself a lifelong bachelor, invisible to even the most desperate spinsters. Yet the sun was still bright, his appetite keen, and the chili just as he preferred it—hot enough to melt asphalt. He ate hungrily, savoring each blistering mouthful.

Inside the bank, a woman customer screamed, unable to stand the growing tension. Startled, one of the robbers saw the elderly guard seem to reach for the gun in his holster, and hastily fired. The old man fell, spouting blood, and the whole scene went out of control. A police cruiser loafing along two blocks away screeched to a stop, turned, and raced towards the sound of the shot.

The two robbers ran from the bank, empty-handed. They heard the siren, their nerves tightened further, and they dashed to their getaway car. It was an old Daimler, and its

mighty, upslanted hood gave it a look of aggressive brute ferocity nothing made today could match. As they left the curb, tires squealing, the police car barrelled around the corner, closing in.

The fugitives' lead was clearly inadequate, and the cruiser quickly overtook them. In a matter of seconds the cop in front with the driver took advantage of the close range and clear field of fire. He should not have pulled the trigger; it was a violation of department policy to endanger the public in such circumstances; he was just supposed to follow and arrange roadblocks.

But the officer's father had been crippled for life during a bank robbery in which his partner had been killed, and the son hated that class of criminals with an almost blind ferocity. He leaned out the window, gun in both hands, lined it up, and shot twice. It was a non-regulation pistol, a .44 Magnum, powerful enough to stagger a Cape buffalo. And he lived up to his reputation as the department's best marksman. Both of the big slugs slammed into the Daimler's driver. The car swerved wildly, mounted the curb, scattering people in all

directions, and crashed through the huge front window of El Matador, a juggernaut of metal almost tank-like in its awesome mass and energy.

Paul Greenwood, having just finished the chili, was cooling his smarting mouth with water and thinking about a hot fudge sundae—dare he risk more sodium and saturated fat with such blood pressure?—when he saw the immense hood, sprinkled with broken glass, bearing directly down on him and seeming to take forever. But no human, even of Olympian agility, could possibly have evaded that black prow. This was no mere glancing blow, but the full impact of tons of mainly unyielding metal. A scream welled up from Greenwood's throat, ballooning enormously, compounded of fear and despair, but it never passed his lips. He was hurtled into his final night.

Paul Greenwood's second lunch with Destiny was over.

At the corner of Forest and Lighthouse the signal was still obeying its built-in, iron law of cycling, mindlessly ordering the flow of cars and people. Green, yellow, red—green, yellow, red—

But Destiny is color-blind.

FICTION



Finally, A Murder

—by—
George C.
Fore

Look, don't get me wrong. I do not approve of homicide. After all, I am a cop. But I have to admit, when I heard that young George Scandor had been found murdered outside his newly inherited mansion, my first reaction was an enthusiastic *at last!*

Not that I had anything against poor Mr. Scandor, either. I didn't even know him. It was just that I hadn't been a cop for very long, see, and, well, I hadn't really ever seen a murder . . . or much else for that matter. I was spending my time as a rookie assigned to the Seventeenth Police District, which in case you don't know, covers most of West Side Heights, the city's most exclusive neighborhood. And while I'm sure most cops have nothing against patrolling quiet streets with impressive houses and lawns the size of Rhode Island, to me it seemed like the end of the road. When Mrs. Black's boy Jim decided to become Officer James Black, one of the city's Finest, I saw myself working other parts of the city, covering robberies, making arrests, learning that street sense you hear so much about. Instead, I'd spent my first five months chasing down rhinestone-collared poodles for society matrons.

Okay, I'm exaggerating. But so far my life as a cop had not

been the Exciting World of Law Enforcement the recruiting guys tell you about. So when the AM/FM digital woke me with news of George Scandor's fate, I decided it was a chance to see at least some of the exciting world that I'd been missing.

I pushed aside thoughts of snooze alarms, set a new all-time record in the shower, shave, and getting dressed event, skipped breakfast, and headed for the station. The roads were still slick from yesterday's snowfall, and as I slid into the parking lot I was cursing both the weather and whatever fate had let a momentous event like a murder happen when I was off duty. I couldn't wait to see what was going on.

What was going on was nothing that I could see, unless you count Sergeant Foley's raised eyebrows at my showing up nearly two hours early for work. Foley, at the duty desk, is a few years this side of retirement and has been around long enough not to let most things bother him. He's not much over five eight, if at all, but he is, among other things, the self-proclaimed world's greatest expert on basketball. He could not understand why anyone would want to get involved with a murder and explained that the detectives could manage well without me, thanks, but maybe

I should just sit tight because something might come up, like maybe someone might decide to send out for doughnuts or something.

So I sat tight. The murder must have really been a shocker to him, too, because he actually talked about it for three or four minutes before he got to his critical analysis of the weaknesses in the Sixers' zone defense. George Scandor had been found at approximately ten fifteen and, according to the call sheet, reported at ten twenty-one the previous evening by one Jeffrey Allen, attorney-at-law. George had apparently been stabbed, inasmuch as there was a knife in his back. He had been pronounced dead at the scene by the rescue squad. Uniforms responded to the initial call, our detectives had followed up, and the case had since been turned over to Homicide, downtown.

So much for the Exciting World of Law Enforcement in this district. Or so I thought.

Foley had moved on to a dissertation on the Celtics' coaching errors when a man came in, nodded to Foley, and disappeared down the corridor to the detectives' area. He was well dressed, immaculately groomed, and sported a very nice tan for a snowy January.

"Hey, was that . . ." I started to ask.

"You got it," Foley replied, "Assistant D.A. Neville Chapman, in the flesh."

By the time you read this, Neville Chapman will probably be president or something. But in case you missed the news, you should know that Chapman was the district attorney's top gun. He was making a name for himself by taking on the biggest cases and then scoring the highest conviction rate of anyone in the history of the D.A.'s office. He's an outspoken and highly visible proponent of law and order, and according to the news guys who've pegged him as the next mayor, congressman, or maybe king, he's an expert on rules of evidence and was instrumental in building the city's crime lab into one of the best this side of the F.B.I., both of which he uses to build airtight cases. I'd certainly never met him in person, but I'd recognized his boyish good looks from his pictures.

"Does he always supervise investigations in person?" I asked.

"Nah," Foley answered casually. "He lives out here. Probably got a phone call and wanted to check it out on the way to the office."

"Boy," I said, looking down the hallway where he'd disappeared. "He really is a go-getter."

"You think so, huh?" Foley looks his age and despite his strong opinions on what he considers to be the true American pastime, he's generally a pretty laid-back guy . . . occasionally even jovial. But I'd caught something in his voice just then, and he was looking at me sharply when I turned around.

"Listen," he said. "You seem to be a bright kid. Let me tell you about the Chapmans of the world. What do you think he's going after? Right now, putting bad guys away is his ticket to the senate or the governor's mansion. But don't think that's just a happy accident. His family has a pretty good supply of both clout and dough. You'd better believe they had a lot to do with his appointment to the D.A.'s office, and to the 'private sector' funding of a good portion of our grade-A crime lab.

"But right now he has a murder, a West Side Heights murder, not just a shooting in some South End bar over a woman or a drug deal. The kind of stuff that makes headlines. Hell, people out here give a party and it's in the papers; just imagine what they'll do with a murder. So you can bet Chapman and his boys are going to be all over this like June bugs on a porch light."

He leaned back and relaxed into a more familiar Foley.

"Well, I guess we can't kick. As long as somebody puts the bad guys away, it's the same thing. Right?"

I looked back to where I'd last seen Chapman. "I guess so," I said. But I wasn't sure.

The moment was broken by the buzz of the intercom phone. Foley grabbed it. "Yeah . . . okay . . . We can cover it. No problem. He's right here."

He hung up and turned to me, grinning. "You got a chauffeur's license? No? Well, don't worry, I won't tell. Seems like Inspector Brandon needs a driver for the day, and you're it. C'mon, I'll introduce you."

Talk about heavy artillery. Chief Inspector Lester Brandon is the head of Homicide. Maybe not as well known outside the department as Neville Chapman, but certainly a very top dog. And of course he didn't really need a driver. I mean he probably drove himself to the station, right? But it's a courtesy, and it meant I was getting a ringside seat on the Scandor affair after all.

Foley gave me the keys to one of the district's newer units, and I followed him to the captain's office, which was vacant due to the captain's still being out recovering from a skiing accident. This, in turn, brought a few comments from Foley on how the captain should have

taken up basketball instead.

Inspector Brandon had set up shop at the small conference table in the office. He's a tall, beefy guy, balding, with blue eyes and reading glasses. I'd seen him when he gave a lecture at the Academy, but I'd never met him one on one. While he looks the part of one of the city's top investigators, his personal manner is more like that of a college professor. He talks slowly and projects a kind of deliberate, contemplative air, which is intensified, perhaps deliberately, by his smoking a pipe. This last is accompanied by the necessary pouch of tobacco, one of those little metal tools that does Lord knows what, and a box of big wooden kitchen matches. He had them all with him on the table at the Academy, and they were all arrayed in front of him here, too. Also on the table, along with the stuff for his pipe, were a lined yellow pad full of notes and about a dozen color photographs. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see they were photos of the murder scene.

Foley made a quick introduction and left. I just stood there uncomfortably, not knowing what to do next and probably looking like an idiot. The inspector looked at me and said, "Relax, son. We're not going anywhere for a while. You had

breakfast? We got some sandwiches here, anything you want as long as it's ham and cheese. Pull up a chair, eat." He gestured to the little table where the captain's coffee pot sat. There was a pile of sandwiches, wrapped deli style.

The human mind is a strange machine. I was about to see my first real crime, let alone a murder case, accompany the city's head homicide detective in the process, and maybe even see him work with the D.A.'s top prosecutor... and my first thought was, Where in the hell can anybody buy sandwiches in this neighborhood at six o'clock in the morning? I attributed it to my skipped breakfast and decided to accept the inspector's hospitality. As I ate, I tried to sneak peeks at the pictures.

The inspector put on his glasses and began working on his pipe with that little tool. He asked me about my time in the department, how I liked police work, and so forth. I answered him truthfully and tried to do it as tactfully as I could. "Well," he said at last, "you may see something new today. As soon as we get some statements from the typist, and it gets to be a slightly more civilized hour, we'll go talk to the witnesses. Know anything about the Scandors?"

I thought hard as I chewed

and swallowed. "No, sir, not really. He must have been an outdoorsman, hunter, though."

His eyebrows went up. "Really?"

"If I remember correctly, sir, the Scandor house is on our list as having firearms . . . rifles and shotguns, I think." We keep track of those things when we can. If we're investigating a reported burglary, it's nice to know that the burglar may be armed. Or the homeowner, for that matter.

"No, not the victim. That was his father, also deceased, about a year ago, I guess. Heart attack. He was the outdoorsman."

"Did you know him, sir? The father, I mean?"

The inspector had finished with the little gizmo and was now tamping layers of tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "I can't say I knew him. I met him a couple of times and certainly knew about him. Back before your time, he was one of the city's more colorful characters. Money from wildcat oil wells, invested in real estate. Adventurer, big game hunter. Safaris. Married a local girl and settled down here. Rumor was he came back from one trip with a leopard skin and a bauxite mine. Bought the mine so he could write off his hunting trips." Inspector Brandon finished with the tobacco and used one of the

kitchen matches to light up, sending out great clouds of blue smoke around his head and a not unpleasant aroma throughout the room.

"But by the time I met him," he continued between puffs, "fifteen, twenty years ago or so, his wife was ill, and he'd bought a hunting lodge and a couple of mountains in the Poconos so he could stay closer to home. Wife died shortly after that, and he kind of disappeared from the prominent citizens set.

"Young George here," he said tapping one of the photos with the stem of his pipe, "now in the capable hands of the medical examiner, was definitely not a chip off the old block. He was an investment banker from Boston, down for the day to clear up some matters with his father's estate."

The inspector pushed some of the photos across to me, and I looked at them while he began fiddling with his pipe again. They were all of the body, taken from various angles, and showed a man in a dark topcoat lying face down in the snow. In several, the knife was plainly visible. Protruding from his back, just beside the left shoulder blade, it was angled so it appeared to be pointing to a spot just above Scandor's left ear.

The photographer had used color film, but you could barely

tell. Between the snow, glittering brightly in the flash, and the dark overcoat, everything was pretty much black and white anyway.

Young George had not died gracefully. One hand was in the small of his back and the other was over his shoulder as though he were trying to remove the object that had struck him down. His hat was lying a couple of feet away. One photo showed the weapon in greater detail; the knife had obviously penetrated deeply because only the handle was visible. It was of dark wood or plastic and had several indentations on one side to help one's fingers get a better grip. These were on the side of the handle nearest George's head. The handle also had three brass rivets which gleamed dully in the harsh light, the only spot of color in the picture.

"It seems to be a kitchen knife," said Inspector Brandon, watching me. He was done with his pipe duties and was puffing away full bore.

I looked at all the photos again, half hoping to find a clue or some basis for a clever observation to impress him. There weren't any. I've always heard that the realities of violent death are quite unlike the ones we see in the movies. People are killed for more shallow motives than Hollywood ascribes. The dead

lie more awkwardly, the scenes are more grotesque. Looking at those photos, I guess that seemed true, but my overwhelming impression was that it was all, somehow, just plain shabby. Cheap. Someone had taken more than George Scandor's life. Lying there in the snow, without even his face visible, George Scandor had become simply an object, refuse, rather than a person. The murderer had taken his dignity as well as his life, leaving only a shell to be poked at by police.

The door opened to admit Neville Chapman. He came in as briskly as he had walked by when I'd seen him earlier. "Hello, Brandon; I thought I'd find you here." He stopped and looked at me, then at the photos in my hand. "What's he doing with those?"

Brandon took a couple of experimental puffs on his pipe and reached for his matches. "Allow me to introduce you . . . Neville, this is Officer James Black; Officer Black, Mr. Neville Chapman of the district attorney's office. Officer Black is my driver for this case."

"Your driver! Look, inspector, this is going to be a sensitive case, the Scandors being what they are—were—and now this. I don't think it's a good idea to disseminate any pieces of information . . ."

The inspector leaned forward in his chair and looked intently at Chapman. "Officer Black is a member of the police force officially assigned to this case. If you'd like to request reassignment, showing cause, we'd be happy to consider . . ."

"No, no," Chapman interrupted, waving his hand. It was obvious that these two had crossed swords before. I was distressed both by the fact that I was the object of such high level strife, and also because my view of the good guys—that's us—did not include our being divided up into warring factions.

Chapman turned to me. "Look, son, you want to play Dick Tracy with the inspector here, it's okay with me. But I will have no publicity we don't control. You will not talk with the press. Not a word, a syllable, a sound. Nothing. You understand?"

I did and said so.

He turned back to the inspector with a little grin. "Doesn't matter that much anyway. We'll have it finished by tonight."

Inspector Brandon regarded him from behind a cloud of smoke. "Oh?"

Chapman sat on the edge of the captain's desk. "Sure. The knife came from the house. That narrows the suspects. My lab people are there now and we'll

get a match on something—fingerprints, blood spatters, threads on the knife handle, footprints, something." He looked at the remaining sandwiches on the small table in the corner. "How can you eat those things at this hour of the morning?"

"Years of practice," the inspector replied. "The knife is definitely from the house?"

"Beyond any reasonable doubt. One of the district boys saw the rest of the set in the Scandor kitchen, perfect match, one missing. You can get a positive on it when the lab is done. Been out there yet?"

"No. Waiting for the statements."

"They were just finishing them." He looked at his watch. "Well, I must get to my office. Justice awaits." He started for the door. "If you come up with anything, let me know."

If I had to make a list of things I don't do well, at the top would have to be waiting. But that morning I got a lot of practice. It took the better part of two hours to get out of the station after Chapman left the captain's office. During that time the inspector had procured the statements, read each, some twice, and had made more notes on his yellow pad. I don't know if Chapman's view of the value of my services was responsible,

but for whatever reason, he shared no information with me. When he was finally ready, with statements, notes, and photos in a zippered leather portfolio, we set out for the Scandor house and found the morning traffic had combined with the recent snow to make a half hour drive out of what would normally be ten minutes, tops.

Some of the really large mansions in the Heights have been converted into day schools or homes for the retired, this or that. But many of the large homes and most of the not-so-large — the word “smaller” seems particularly inaccurate here—like the Scandors’ are still private houses. I suppose “estate” would better describe it, because the Scandor home is really a group of buildings, dominated by a rather boxy looking Tudor style main house set at the end of a long driveway in the wooded hills. I parked next to a police van with the words MOBILE CRIME LAB painted on it, and held the door for the inspector.

We both paused to look around. We were in a parking area in front of the main house, which, I noticed, had been plowed more efficiently than the streets. The center portion of the house was set back slightly, to form a shallow U

shape. The main doors to the house were in this center portion, behind a small terrace formed by a stone railing extending straight across the front of the house. The double doors of the front entrance were of dark wood with brass hardware and reminded me of the knife handle in the inspector’s photos. All the windows of the house, as far as I could see, were barred. To our left, on the farther arm of the U, was a smaller doorway, also in the front of the house, and near it two men were crawling around in the snow. The inspector started off purposefully in their direction. I followed, wondering briefly if I was supposed to wait with the car.

The two got to their feet as we approached. The nearest, an earmuffed six footer, gave a casual salute, “Hello, inspector.”

“Hi, Pete. Meet Jim Black, Seventeenth.” We shook hands. “Anything?” the inspector asked.

“Hard to say until we get back to the lab, but it doesn’t look promising.” He blew on his hands and flexed his fingers. Behind him, a fluorescent orange ribbon was held down with steel pins to form the rough outline of the body, feet pointing toward the nearby door. Again I thought of the photos.

"Apparently came through there," Pete continued, motioning to the door. "Took maybe half a dozen steps and bingo, right in the back."

The other man, shorter and darker than Pete, joined the group and was introduced as Tony.

"I don't suppose there're any footprints," the inspector said.

"The sidewalk here's been cleared," answered Pete, indicating the path near the door. "Snow's completely undisturbed on either side of the door itself, and beside the body..."

"We got lots of prints," finished Tony. "Cops, family, M.E., usual stuff around a murder." He surveyed his sodden knees. "Say, inspector, you think you could get me a transfer to the southern division, like maybe Miami?"

After a couple more minutes of banter, we left them to finish their search of the scene.

The inspector's knock on the big double doors was answered by a guy who could have been a professional wrestler a few years back. He stood several inches over my five eleven and was broader than the inspector. He looked quite civilized, though, with a white shirt, dark tie, and what appeared to me to be a sort of linen smoking jacket.

"Mr. Breunig? Chief Inspector Brandon, Homicide."

"Oh; yes, inspector, come in. Let me take your coats." He had a surprisingly soft voice with an accent, German or Dutch.

We were admitted to a wide entrance hall which was narrowed ahead by an impressive stairway. I looked around as Breunig took our coats. An arched doorway on our right opened onto a living room, huge by my standards. The Tudor effect was continued inside with plaster walls and beams, but from the hall the effect was spoiled by a section of a large commercial copy machine visible through a door on our left. I turned my attention back to Breunig as he deposited our coats on a rack near the door.

"I'm sorry, inspector, but some of the others have gone. There's only Miss Ditner, Mr. Barker, and of course Hilda and myself."

As he turned to finish his sentence, I saw he was probably younger than I'd first pegged him. His hair was as much blond as grey, thinning though it was, and his face was unlined. He had pale blue eyes and met the inspector's gaze coolly, showing no expression. When the inspector said he'd speak to Miss Ditner first, his "very good" came out "furry goot." All in all, I decided, not a fellow I'd tangle with if I could help it.

He led us through the door with the copying machine into another good-sized room with assorted office furniture, a small conference table, and a sofa with two matching chairs, all arranged to divide the room functionally into smaller units. A conservatively dressed woman in her early fifties was seated on the sofa when we came in and rose while Breunig made introductions. Miss Eleanor Ditner's most outstanding feature was that she was incredibly thin; only her businesslike manner and dress kept her from appearing absolutely frail.

The inspector was apologetic. "Sorry to have to bother you at a time like this, ma'am, but I've got your statement here to sign. Sometimes it's best to put this sort of thing behind us as quickly as we can."

"Oh, it's no bother. I was just putting some files in order." She motioned to some folders spread out on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Her voice was clear and strong; on the phone she'd sound like a much larger woman. "Please sit down."

I grabbed a chair some distance away, near a desk, while the inspector took one near the sofa and pulled her statement from his case. He looked puzzled.

"According to the statements

from last night," he said, "you were George Scandor, Sr.'s secretary and the last to see George, Jr., alive."

"Yes, I did work for George's father, and I guess I was the last to see young George alive . . . except for the killer, of course." She said this, too, in a calm, businesslike manner. Maybe everyone was used to talking about killers but me, I thought. "He left through that door and was struck down just outside," she continued, indicating the door toward the front of the room. It was the one on the other side of which Pete and Tony were looking for clues.

"And you heard no noise, no sound of a struggle, no voices?" the inspector asked, reading from her statement.

"No—inspector, is it?" He nodded and she continued. "There may have been, but I was starting to type a letter, so unless they were unusually loud I may not have heard them. The first I knew about it was when Jeff, Jeff Allen, one of our attorneys, came in and said to call the police."

"Was that a letter Mr. Scandor had dictated?" The inspector was watching her very closely.

"Yes."

"What was it about?"

That got a visible reaction. I had her face in profile and

couldn't see her expression that well, but when the inspector shot that one out, she gave a slight jolt, moving her head and shoulders about an inch.

"It was a reference. I stayed on after Mr. Scandor passed away to help straighten things out here and to work with the executors. Since George was planning to consolidate his father's business interests and handle them through his office in Boston, my job here was finished. Before he left, George dictated a letter for my use in seeking another position. I was to send it to him with some other documents for his signature."

The inspector considered a moment. "Was he going to find you another position?"

"I don't think so, inspector. He couldn't 'be encouraging' was the way he put it."

"You live on the estate, Miss Ditner?"

"Yes. There's an apartment over the garage in back. Quite nice. I've lived there for some time now." She looked at the inspector sharply. "Under the circumstances I know I must be a suspect, and I know you must be wondering why I'm not devastated by George's death. I'd like to tell you to set the record straight."

"Young George was not a member of this household nor

involved in the Scandor businesses. He left fifteen years ago to make his own way in the world. He had different interests, different values from his father and visited here only infrequently, usually during the holidays. I barely knew him.

"I can tell you, too, that his father was disappointed in him. Nothing was ever said, of course, but I could tell. His father was a wonderful man. He worked hard, played hard, and always had time for people. He was very successful, as you can see, but he never cheated anyone and took great pains to help those who needed it. Young George was different. His only interest seemed to be money, and how to use it. Not spend it, use it. I suspect he regarded people as expensive necessities in his business world.

"If he had moved back here and taken over the reins of the Scandor businesses, I would have given notice anyway. I would not have been happy working for him. But I didn't kill him."

There was a pause as the inspector took all this in. "Thank you for being so candid, Miss Ditner," he said quietly. "We won't take up much more of your time, but there is one more thing. You said George had come down yesterday for some sort of meeting?"

"Yes. The Scandor holdings are—were—quite extensive. It took the executors and auditors the better part of a year to sort them all out. It was all legally George's, or most of it. Mr. Scandor remembered all of us in his will, except for Mr. Allen, of course."

"And the meeting?"

"Now that the auditors and tax people are finished, George wanted everyone to hear his intentions regarding portions of the estate. He was going to sell the hunting lodge in the mountains and this house. He gave notice to Mr. Barker—he's the caretaker of the lodge—and the Breunigs."

"What were their reactions?" asked the inspector.

"Knowing George, I don't think anyone should have been surprised," she said after thinking a moment. "But George wasn't always the most tactful person, and yesterday he was, well, really quite blunt. I think most people would have been uncomfortable firing their father's servants and friends, but George wasn't. I don't think he ever understood the relationships here... maybe he couldn't. He was just making financial decisions."

"Mrs. Breunig was unnerved. This is the only home she's known in this country, and she is quite frightened over the

prospect of leaving. Barker may have been disturbed also. He said he wasn't feeling well. Despite his gruff exterior, he's really a bit of a romantic, and I'm sure he would just as soon stay on at the lodge for the rest of his days, isolated from the world the rest of us have to deal with. As for Mr. Breunig," she added with a shrug, "I got no impression at all, one way or another."

"Who else was at this 'meeting'?"

"Jennifer... Jennifer Dobbs. She was George's cousin, Mr. Scandor's niece. She lived here for a few years while she was in college. She was quite attached to Hilda Breunig and was concerned about how poor Hilda took the news yesterday. Now, of course, Jenny's engaged to Mr. Allen, and so he was at the meeting as well."

"I see. Getting back to the actual incident, can you tell me anything you might not have remembered clearly last night?"

"I don't think so. It was just as I said. George got his coat from the hall; I heard him tell Jeff to go warm up the car so he could take him to the airport; and he came back in here. We finished up a couple of things, which took a few minutes, maybe three or four. Then he left. That's the last I saw of him."

The inspector had her sign her statement, which she read carefully. She told us we could probably find the Breunigs in the kitchen, toward the rear of the house.

Our route to the kitchen took us through the living room, dining room, and I guess what would be called a breakfast room just off the kitchen. I was wired. Here, in the victim's house, listening to witnesses, I was trying to hear everything and look everywhere . . . without seeming too obvious, of course. Of the three rooms, the breakfast room seemed to be the only one in general use. The others were nicely furnished, good-sized, well proportioned rooms; large, but without making you too aware of it. But they were sterile. There was no sign of human habitation that I could see . . . no magazines, newspapers, mail, or even photos. Nothing personal at all. The furniture looked expensive, but uncomfortable. I couldn't even say it looked as barren as a furniture ad, since they inevitably include an open book or plate of fruit or something to make it look as if someone had been there once. If the inspector noticed this, he gave no indication of it to me.

The kitchen itself was definitely not something from your average split level. The stove

was a huge black commercial job, the refrigerators—that's right, plural—had double stainless steel doors, and there were three sinks, including one very large number, also of stainless steel, which looked like it too belonged in a restaurant. A variety of pots and pans hung from racks over a large wooden table in the center of the room.

Hilda Breunig, sitting at the table, was the exact opposite of Eleanor Ditner: big-boned, well-padded and demonstratively unhappy. She had apparently been weeping and was making good use of a box of tissues on the table. Mr. Breunig was standing near her, patting her shoulder with a gentleness I found surprising in a man of his size.

After introductions, during which I learned that Breunig's first name was Carl, the inspector got down to business. "I understand Mr. Scandor was to catch a plane last night. Mr. Allen was to drive him to the airport?"

"Yes, this is true," answered Hilda. Her accent was stronger than her husband's, who simply nodded agreement.

The inspector had pulled some of the statements from his folder and was fussing with both those and his glasses. "And you were in the living room when Mr.

Scandor asked Mr. Allen to warm up the car," was made as a statement, not a question, reading from the typewritten sheet.

"Yes," Mrs. Breunig again, "I was in the living room with them, Mr. Allen and Jennifer. Carl was . . ."

"I was about to serve coffee," finished Carl.

"And what happened then?" asked the inspector, looking over his glasses at them both.

"Mr. Allen got his coat and went out to the car. A few minutes later he came in and told us what had happened and that he'd already called the police." Carl again.

"He went out the front door?"

"Yes," said Carl.

"But," added Hilda, "he came in through the office."

"And you, Mrs. Breunig, were in the living room the whole time?"

"Yes, with Jennifer."

"And Mr. Breunig was . . ." he asked, turning to Carl.

"In and out of the kitchen, bringing the coffee service and pouring the coffee."

"While you were doing this, did you notice that any of the knives were missing?"

"No," answered Carl, "the police last night asked me about them, too. I'm sorry, but I cannot help. We keep them there," he pointed to a rack near the

stove from which protruded a number of handles like the one in the photos. "But some are frequently missing, for the cleaning or being used." His accent had gotten thicker during this statement, and I wondered if it varied with his stress level. He didn't seem to show emotion any other way.

The inspector seemed to sense it, too, because he took a few moments to study the statement.

"Mr. Barker was here yesterday as well?"

"Yes," replied Carl. "He was in the den. He'd gone upstairs shortly after dinner. I do not believe he was feeling well."

"He did not want to have coffee with us," said Hilda. "Jennifer and I could see the front stairs from the living room. He did not come down until later, until after . . ." She stopped, sighed deeply, and looked like she was going to cry again. Carl put his arm around her.

"That is true," Carl said, comforting his wife. "We have been in this house for twenty-two years. I am to be available for requests, messages, and so forth, I know where people are in the house. Mr. Barker did not come down until the police had arrived."

"Twenty-two years," Hilda started, then lost it in a sob.

Carl hugged her gently. "You

must forgive my wife," he said quietly. "She is not herself."

"We were so naive," she said, waving Carl away. "Mr. Scandor brought us to this house from the old country. This is our home. We thought young George would come back here to live, but now we must go, and we don't know where." She was busy with the tissues again.

While I was taking all this in, the inspector had picked up something that I had missed. "You said the 'front stairs.' There are back stairs as well?"

There were, and they opened into the kitchen. But, said Breunig, no one had used them last evening because he, in and out of the kitchen, would have seen and heard. They "make the creaking" was the way he put it. There was also a back door to the house in the kitchen, which led to my one contribution to the case.

The door had a deadbolt lock that needed a key to open, even from the inside. The Breunigs said the door was rarely used in the winter, and was always kept locked. The inspector was asking about keys to the door, who had them, where they were kept, and so forth when I happened to look through the window of the door. Snow was drifted against it, with no footprints anywhere near. No one had used that door for at least

several hours before the murder. Inspector Brandon came to the same conclusion when I showed him and he rewarded me with a nod.

After his and Mrs. Breunig's signed statements were safely in the inspector's folder, Carl suggested we might find Barker in Mr. Scandor's den, so we made that next on our agenda.

Any lack of character in the rest of the house was more than offset by the den. It was on the second floor and occupied the entire space over both the entry hall and the office. But it was remarkable not for its size but for the things it held. It was an ecologist's worst nightmare. Here were the Scandor trophies. Heads, horns, hooves, and hides were displayed in a variety and quantity possible only through the efforts of a serious and well financed hunter over a number of years. It was like walking into a movie set or, perhaps more accurately, a prop room. There were too many to count or identify, but the tiger skins, zebra hides, and bear heads were immediately obvious. Here was what a life of adventure had meant before anyone had ever heard of "endangered species." From the looks of this room, old George might have endangered a few all by himself.

Almost entirely oversha-

dowed by all of this was an arsenal worthy of the name. Dozens of rifles and shotguns of various bores, makes, and lengths were displayed in cabinets and on racks around the room. And Scandor did not hunt by bullet alone, for there were also a number of crossbows as well as a few businesslike hunting bows with pistol-like grips and compound curves. To complete the decor, spears and blowguns were displayed along with other articles of primitive manufacture. The initial impact of the room was stunning.

In the midst of all this, a husky, balding man in his late forties, maybe early fifties, sat on a sofa studying a framed photograph. I was taking a mental inventory of the room while the inspector went through his "sorry to bother you" speech, and when I turned back to them, they were both sitting, the inspector in a chair with his pipe going and Barker still on the sofa, reading his statement. I opened some window curtains at his request for more light.

The window was immediately above the office door, and as I adjusted the curtains the outline of the body on the lawn outside caught my eye. Pete and Tony were gone, and the scene looked bleak and deserted. I didn't quite know what

to expect in a murder case, but to me things did not seem to be fitting together too well. The inspector, Eleanor Ditner, the Breunigs, even this room and, I supposed, Barker, too, all seemed to be more involved with Scandor, Sr., dead these many months, than with the man who'd died here last night. What of George, Jr.? He had turned his back on his father's avocation, values . . . even everyone close to the family. Indeed, had turned his back once too often.

There was an irony here, too. George had died out there, within a few yards of this room, filled as it was with every conceivable sort of weapon, struck down not by arrow, gun, or spear, but by a common kitchen knife. A sort of final denial of his father. As I watched, a stream of windblown snow covered part of the ribbon outlining where George had fallen. Even nature, it seemed, wanted to be done with George Scandor, Jr.

I turned from the window as Barker said, "I guess it's okay." The inspector handed him a pen and strode to look out the window. I guessed he didn't want to fall for that back door business twice.

"Mr. Barker?" he said without turning.

"Frank."

"Frank. You may be the key to this whole case."

"Me? I was upstairs the whole time!"

"Yes, everyone seems to agree on that point." The inspector turned to face him. "But you might have seen or heard something, something you don't even think is important, but something which could be vital. Just go through it once more for me."

Barker blinked and looked at the statements. "It's like I said here. After our meeting I got a drink of water from the kitchen. That's terrible stuff, you know, all the goop they put in it. I don't know how you stand it."

"Yes, I know. Go on."

"Well, I told everybody I was turnin' in, and that's it."

"And you went to bed?"

"I was packin'. Wanted to get an early start this morning. I got things need tendin' at the lodge. Next thing I knew, place was full of cops . . . er, police."

"And you didn't hear anything before then? Noises outside, anything like that?"

"Naw, my room is in the back. Wouldn't have heard anything anyway."

The inspector examined his pipe. "Is that you in the picture?" he asked quietly, pointing to the photo Barker had been studying when we came in. It was of two men and a dead animal.

"Yeah. Me and Mr. Scandor. Nineteen years ago in Suriname. That's in South America. We got ourselves a tapir. My wife had left me, and I think he took me on that trip to get my mind off things. That's when he offered me the job at the lodge. Been there ever since. Those were the good times, inspector, at the lodge. I was hopin' . . . Nah, George wasn't like his old man. Those dozer jockeys been itchin' to get their hands on that place. Chop it up. Subdivide it. I guess they'll get their chance."

He was studying the picture again as we left. I don't think his eyes were quite dry.

After stopping for lunch—ham and cheese again; I remembered the inspector telling Chapman about the years of practice; he wasn't kidding—we found Jennifer Dobbs in her center city apartment. It was one of those formerly elegant buildings where maintenance is always in distant pursuit of need. She had long, reddish-brown hair, and a tendency toward freckles, and she looked attractive, even though she'd undoubtedly had a rough time the night before. She was also very informal, answering the door in bluejeans and bare feet.

Her story didn't help much. She had been in the living room with Hilda Breunig when Jef-

frey Allen had left to start the car. Carl was in and out, but she didn't think he was ever gone for very long. Hilda was upset. She saw Barker go upstairs to bed and did not see him come down until after Allen had found the body.

"I guess this doesn't look good for Jeff," she said somberly.

The inspector smiled—I think for the first time that day. "We don't usually jail people for finding a body, only causing one." He paused, then changed the subject. "How long have you known Mr. Allen?"

"Years, sort of." She smiled, too. "We dated when he was in law school and during his first year of practice. We didn't see each other often, so it wasn't really anything serious. I got the chance to study in Europe for two years, and we lost track of each other. Then, about four or five months ago, there was a copyright problem with one of my designs, and I found Jeff working for the firm that represents us. We seemed to pick up where we left off and became engaged a few weeks ago."

"You're an artist?"

"I prefer 'graphic designer,' but yes. For Scandor Publishing."

The inspector had used the phone during lunch and arranged to meet Jeffrey Allen at the inspector's office, so we de-

clined Jennifer's offer of coffee and left.

You would think a chief inspector, and the head of Homicide at that, would have a sizable, if not well-appointed, office. Inspector Brandon's was neither. It was barely large enough to contain the scarred wooden desk, two chairs, bookcase, and filing cabinet it held, all of which had seen years of service. The room smelled of the inspector's pipe tobacco.

Allen had called to say he'd be a little late. The inspector crumpled the message and tossed it into the waste can. "Well," he said, reaching for the phone, "we can use the time." He dialed and asked someone if the lab was through with the weapon and could he see it.

It arrived in a sealed plastic bag. He signed for it, broke the seal, and examined the knife very carefully, even using a magnifying glass at one point, Sherlock Holmes style. He took his time, but after a while passed it to me.

It had a ten inch blade, and believe me, that's a good sized knife. I'm not really up on cutlery, but it seemed to be a quality utensil; a wooden handle, nicked and scarred from use, with brass rivets and a long straight blade. The inspector had spent some time examining the handle, so I looked at this

carefully myself. I didn't know what I could learn from this unless there was significance to some of the nicks and scratches. There seemed to be a sort of notch-shaped gouge at the end of the handle, some long scratches along the length . . . and about a million others when you started to look closely, including one so deep it took out a small chunk of one of the rivets as well as leaving an inch long scar in the wood. There was nothing there that looked unusual to me.

"It's a slicer," said the inspector, moving his hand in a slicing motion. "For slicing roasts and the like. You don't spend thirty years in Homicide without knowing about knives."

Jeffrey Allen arrived a little later. He was straight from Central Casting . . . sincere young attorney with old, prominent firm. His hair was cut to a respectable length, and he wore a conservatively cut blue suit, with red tie, of course. He was as tall as the inspector, trim and athletic looking, and exuded an air of confidence. He would, I thought, be at home in any country club in the world.

And, of course, his story matched everyone else's. He'd been in the living room with the others when George asked him to start the car. He'd gotten his coat from the hall, gone out the

front door to the car, got tired of waiting, started toward the office, and found the body. The meeting earlier had not been, Allen said, a pleasant experience, George lacking, as he put it, "certain civilities in handling these situations."

"Mr. Allen," the inspector asked, "were the outside lights on when you went to the car?"

"Yes, as I said in my statement, I'd turned them on myself. And before you ask," he said with a candid smile, "I didn't see anyone else outside. But remember, I was busy for a while clearing snow off the car, and was not watching the house at all."

So much for Mr. Allen's contribution. As I was helping him on with his topcoat, the inspector took a phone call. After Allen had gone, he put the knife, now back in its plastic bag, into his leather portfolio. "Get your hat," he said. "The honorable Neville Chapman wants to see us in his office. Now."

The newspaper guys are wrong about Chapman. He is not a man on the way up. After seeing his office I can tell you he's a man who has arrived. Maybe not peaked yet, but definitely arrived. It was large, immaculately uncluttered, and furnished with period furniture that looked both elegant and valuable.

But Chapman was not the man I'd met that morning. He greeted us both warmly—even shook my hand—and motioned us to chairs.

"Inspector," he said, after settling in behind his desk, "I need your help. I procured a copy of young George Scandor's will today. It was drawn up eleven years ago, just before he took his position in Boston. It leaves everything to his father and, in the event his father precedes him in death, to Jennifer Dobbs, his cousin, to be held in trust until she's twenty-one. Quite standard, of course. But she's twenty-three now, so she'll get the whole lump. George, Sr., left her a bit, but with George, Jr.'s death her assets, as they say in financial circles, will move from 'adequate' to 'impressive.' And that gives Jeffrey Allen a motive, a damn good one. When you're marrying money, more is better.

"Which brings me to my problem. Did Allen know about that will? Under normal circumstances I'd say probably not. I don't even think the Dobbs girl knows about it yet. But Allen works with the law firm that drew it up; in fact, they made this copy for me today. And if I'm not mistaken, he's only recently rekindled the romance with her.

"Inspector, you know me.

We've had our differences over procedure and protocol, but you know I don't back off from prosecution. We build good cases and don't bargain pleas. And I don't intend to start now. The lab shows Allen is our guy, but until I got this will we couldn't show motive. We can now, but we can't prove it. Yet.

"I'm going to be frank with you, Les. Allen is a promising young attorney with a prominent firm. The senior partner is a lifelong friend of our family. Notoriety is not welcome. Before I tag one of his people with a murder, I've got to be sure. There are more than a hundred attorneys employed at that firm and thousands and thousands of documents on file. I've got to know, with absolute, provable certainty, that Allen had knowledge of that will. And the inquiries must be handled discreetly. You get me that information and I promise, prominent firm or not, we'll press the case."

The inspector sat quietly for a while, just looking at Chapman. "Neville," he finally said, "you may not have a problem at all. I think we can agree that everyone there had a motive of some sort. Or at least a strong resentment for the victim."

Chapman was plainly interested. "Yes, but who . . ."

The inspector cut him off.

"Let's just relax a minute and think this through." He got out the gear and started slowly to fill his pipe.

Well, I thought while the inspector tamped tobacco, no wonder Chapman's so friendly. If Sergeant Foley were here, I decided, he'd point out that the essence of Chapman's problem was that his political meal ticket was running afoul of his Old Boy network. And with the scrutiny this case will get, he's not going to be able to cut anybody a break, so he damn well better be right. That makes the potato too hot for him, so he wants the inspector to carry it. I was feeling really pleased with myself for the brilliance of these insights when the inspector dropped the bomb on me.

He lit his pipe, then asked, almost casually, "What do you think, Officer Black?"

I nearly fell off my chair. If there was to be any jousting between Homicide and the D.A.'s office, I certainly did not want to be in the middle of it. Nor did I want to try to second-guess either of these guys in a murder investigation. But I did have a theory.

I took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I think Miss Ditner, the father's secretary, is the only one who could have done it."

Chapman, after admitting he

needed the inspector's help, had apparently resigned himself to playing the game. Or maybe he really hoped I had a way out of implicating his friend's law firm. "And why do you think that, Officer Black?" he asked most politely.

"Well," I said slowly, trying to plan every word, "everyone else seems to have an alibi corroborated by others, except Miss Ditner and Jeff Allen. Barker couldn't have gotten outside without being seen by a roomful of people, the Breunigs and Jennifer were all within sight of each other. Scandor was stabbed in the back, but he was walking *away* from the Ditner woman as he was leaving the office and *towards* Allen. And he was stabbed just outside the door. How could Allen have gotten behind him? It must have been Ditner."

"Not a bad theory," Chapman said, "but I see you share the inspector's lack of faith in our lab. Have you seen the murder weapon?"

We both nodded. The inspector retrieved it from his case. "I have it right here," he said.

"Look at that blade," continued Chapman. "I know you saw the photos of the body this morning. That blade was buried to the hilt, and the lab tells me this took force, a great deal of force. Far more than Miss

Ditner's frail form could muster. In addition, the angle is wrong. Given Scandor's height and the angle of the wound, the murderer had to be at least six feet tall.

"Now, part of your theory is right. Ditner or Allen it has to be, and of the two of them only one is a muscular six footer. Which brings us, Inspector Brandon, back to where we were."

The inspector fiddled with his pipe. "You know, Neville, we really don't disagree with the value of the lab, only on how we use it. This case is a good example.

"You put too much faith in the conclusions the lab boys make, rather than the facts they base them on. Now, what can they tell us about this knife? They can tell us where it was made, maybe where it was purchased, maybe how much it's been used, and in a lot of cases that type of information would be useful. But sometimes they report facts without making conclusions because they don't have enough information about other aspects of the case. And sometimes you have to tell them what to look for in the first place. And that's what I am going to suggest in this case, since I think George Scandor died because he was shot to death."

Chapman and I exchanged glances, and I know we both had the same thought. The inspector's slipped a gear. As if by signal we both turned and looked at him again.

"Here, Officer Black, stand up, take the knife." I did so. "Now pretend you are going to stab someone in the back." I did this too.

"Hold it," he said as I took a downstroke. "Look at how you're holding it." I looked at my hand; I was holding the knife by the handle, of course, in a stabbing rather than slashing position, with the sharpened edge of the blade down. "When you stab something," he continued, "you hold the knife differently from the way you use it to slice. The indentations on the handle, meant for your fingers, are actually against your thumb. The knife was the other way around in the photos you saw this morning, wasn't it?"

I wasn't sure, but nodded anyway.

"Now, why would anyone want to use a knife upside down? Unless it's because they needed to have the nice, straight back edge facing in a particular direction for a certain reason. Barker was upstairs when Scandor was killed. Barker said he got a drink of water before he went up. From the kitchen? Did he go up the back stairs?

With this knife? The butler, Breunig, says he was in the den; Barker says he was packing, in his bedroom. If you look in the den you'll find, among other things, a number of crossbows. Nasty little gadgets that shoot short little arrows . . .

maybe about the same length as this knife. And if you ask the lab to compare some of the marks on this knife with those crossbows, I'll bet you'll find a match. I think Barker is our guy. And I think he shot Scan-

dor in the back with a crossbow for the simple reason that George, Jr., wasn't the man his father was. He just figured we'd assume it was a stabbing and either grab the wrong guy or not be able to figure it out. And that lets Allen off the hook."

That was what the inspector thought. And after the lab got to work again, the D.A.'s office agreed with him; a few months later, so did a jury.

And me? I finally got a chance to see a real murder case.

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Bahia del Sur

by
M. R.
Drummond

Her body appeared suddenly, several feet beneath the skiff, a dark shape rising rapidly in the bluegray waters. Jeff, our crewman, saw her first and quickly cut the engine. We began to drift, waiting. The only sound was the lapping of the waves. She broke the surface gently,

rolling slightly to one side, her back bowed, slipping by silently, only inches away. Impulsively, I plunged my bandaged arm into the icy waters and touched her side. Her skin was strangely soft, foam-rubber-like, and very cold. Her large left eye stared impassively. Close up I could see

that her skin was mottled gray and pocked with old barnacle scars and covered with sea parasites. Then she slipped away, as quickly as she had come.

No one said a word, it all happened too fast. We rocked silently, perched on the skiff's wide rails, scanning the choppy waters.

"There's two this time!"

"Where?"

"Thar she blows!"

The same California gray whale surfaced and circled the skiff, followed closely by the smooth gray hump of her unblemished calf. Their blowholes exploded with warm, steamy air, showering all five of us.

"Heather Rose, my camera!"

"I told you to bring the waterproof one, Mother."

And I had, several times. The woman refused to make any concessions to nature. My mother, Gin MacKenzie, was at the same time stubborn, exasperating, and totally helpless. She always had been. Now she sat crouched uncomfortably next to the standing, sunburned crewman, Jeff. She was a sight in that blue-green world of sea and sky in her shocking pink designer raingear as she dabbed furiously at her drenched camera with a soggy hanky. Diminutive Dr. Flood looked on solicitously from across the skiff, but did nothing.

No wonder Dad had never taken her fishing, I thought, or to a ballgame, or anywhere that wasn't glassed-in, carpeted, and air conditioned. And yet, they would have been married thirty-seven years, if he had lived.

The massive mother and child took another massive breath and disappeared for good in a froth of bubbling foam.

"Now I'll never get a good shot," cried Mother.

Jeff stared at me with faded eyes as impassive as the mother whale's, no doubt thinking we should toss old Gin back and try for a keeper. But I knew I'd never do that, no matter how different we were on the surface. And we had always been different, strangers living in the same house. Would we be that way again? Even though, now that I'm older, I'll admit there is a slight physical resemblance between us, although I definitely inherited my bright orange hair from Dad. Beyond that, our main tie is that we both love animals, again each in our own way.

I'd always been Dad's girl and my sister Annie had been hers. I guess I was the substitute for the son my dad never had, or as close as I could come without a sex change operation. We spent a lot of time together and were closer than any father-son combinations I know.

Until I left home for good,

Dad regularly took me sport fishing on daytrips out of Redondo, back in the days when the fish were safe to eat and I was still eating fish. I loved watching the dolphins as they cavorted off the bow.

"You can always find your way back to port when the dolphins are with you," he said. "They know the way."

We also went to all the Rams home games, rain or shine, where he talked incessantly about some gridiron legend named Crazy Legs—a little before my time. Dad was an inveterate sports fan, and he really encouraged me in sports, although I'm sure he didn't think I'd stick with it as long as I have. I'll be thirty-five in April, not that it makes much difference.

Anyway, while Mother ran around with Annie to ballet classes, piano lessons, and department stores, I progressed under my dad's loving eyes through tumbling and gymnastics and, when I got too big for that, into some hardcore volleyball. By the time I switched to powerlifting three years ago, he'd lost some of his enthusiasm for my athletic career, but I'm not sure why. I never took any drugs to get big and I never tried to develop a high-definition hardbody like a bodybuilder. Nobody is ever going to mistake me for a man; I just

got strong, very strong for my one hundred twenty pound frame.

In most ways, we were a happy family and my parents had an ideal marriage. They had divided the children as they divided the roles they played in life. They divided the rooms in the house, although Dad got shortchanged there: he only got the den. They even divided up the day: Dad was the morning person and Mother was the night person. I'm more like her in that respect, although I used to beat the sunrise many a time when I was in training. It's too bad Dad never trained. He'd be alive today, I know it.

He'd just finished their new redwood deck the day before. It was easily five thousand square feet and covered the entire hillside behind their house in Redondo—the same one Annie and I grew up in. The deck cantilevered over the edge and hung above the rocks. On a clear day there were fantastic views of the Pacific, and you could see the curving coastline all the way north to Santa Monica. The entire deck was enclosed with a full-length safety glass wind shield to protect Mother's coiffure from the stiff offshore breezes that started up every afternoon.

He was in the kitchen alone at four that next morning, forty

pounds overweight, brewing the first pot of the double-strength coffee he loved, and smoking the first of the sixty or seventy king sized, unfiltered cigarettes he smoked every day. No doubt he picked a few tobacco flakes from his tongue before he started coughing, just as he'd done every morning since I was a little girl. I'd often seen his face get as red as the hair on his head. He must have coughed and choked, gasping for the breath that never came. He had a massive heart attack and died. When he hit the floor, he pulled the coffee pot with him, and Mother heard it all the way upstairs in their bedroom. But Dad coughed violently every morning, and sometimes he dropped things in the kitchen, so she rolled over and went back to sleep. She didn't find him until ten A.M. Stewart MacKenzie, my dad, had turned fifty-five the week before.

For the past two years, Gin has been adrift, to use an appropriate nautical term. Sure, she has her half-dozen ladies' clubs and activities, but she'd never lived alone before. And it still scares her once in a while. I guess I haven't been around as much as I should have been. Since my sister Annie lives outside Denver with her fantastically successful but gypsy-like husband and all the family grandkids, it really was

my responsibility to keep an eye on her. There's been pressure from Annie for me to move in with Mother, now that Pat and I have broken up. I don't know if I can do it. There are some things about my personal life that she's never approved of, or even understood. It's been a sore point between us for a long time.

And yet we love each other, and she needs me. Sometimes I wonder who is the parent and who is the child. The line begins to blur, as I get older.

Another skiff sped across the Mexican lagoon carrying five hopeful sightseers. They were going to be disappointed. The whales were scarce, and our skiff had seen the only action that day, our last day. It was late February, and the breeding and calving seasons were over. This was the last tour until fall. Most of the whales had already passed through the channel, leaving the protective shelter of Laguna San Ignacio and its deserted beaches for the open sea. It was time they headed north to their winter feeding grounds, following the pattern set hundreds of years ago. Now only a few mothers remained in the calm Mexican bay while their calves gathered strength for the long trip home.

The MacKenzie family mother-daughter trip was actually my idea. I was testing

the waters to see if we really could live together again, at least temporarily. Maya Culp, an old friend from my all-too-brief pro volleyball days, is now the shipboard marine biologist. Whenever she was in town she raved about the trip so much that I knew I had to go. Maya takes about a dozen trips down the Mexican coast each season on the *Mystic Queen*, doing exactly what she always said she would do: earn a living doing what she loves to do. Unlike my aborted legal career.

After six months of law school, I burned out on education. I hit the beach for a one-year sabbatical thirteen years ago, and it became a way of life. I did a few pro tournaments each year and made enough money waiting tables at both the Blockade Runner and the Spa to pay for half an apartment within easy jogging distance of the beach. Until Pat left. Now maybe I'd be making the long journey home, temporarily. It wasn't far away in miles, but . . .

Anyway, Mother, who is an officer in several clubs including the local Cetacean Society, had never actually seen a whale except through a pair of binoculars while her own feet were firmly planted on dry land. The California grays round a point on the Palos Verdes Peninsula near her home twice a year during their annual migration. I

spent a month talking her into the trip, with Annie's help, and now we were shipboard roommates in a claustrophobic two-bunk, one-sink cabin with just enough floor space for us to take turns standing up.

I'd memorized every inch of *Mystic Queen's* eighty-five foot length over the last few days. The constant throb of the engine echoed in my brain. No one could move on the cluttered decks without brushing by another passenger. There were many awkward silences. Five days into an eight day trip, we'd heard everyone's life story, several times over in the case of some of the older passengers. I was looking forward to tomorrow's excursion on Isla San Benito. Solid land, room to stretch out, maybe do some jogging. A few days of shipboard immobility and I was getting out of shape.

At dawn the engines stopped. I didn't hear them cut off, but I felt the silence and so did everyone else. I got up first and went out into the relatively wide passageway that ran between the five small cabins in the aft portion of the ship. I began doing some stretching exercises in the passageway while my mother started work on her face. Except for us, there were married couples in the aft

cabins. Two of the cabins were actually empty this trip, which was a good thing because the fresh-air ducts had failed two nights before in our cabin and one other, and we had to play musical cabins in the middle of the night. The rest of the passengers, all single women and men, were segregated forward on opposite sides of the boat in a dormitory arrangement with tiers of three bunks to the wall, although there were some empty spaces up there too, as it was late in the season. But no matter how you cut it, there wasn't enough room and very little privacy on board.

The other aft cabin doors began to open. Ralph, the pale, chubby birdwatcher, leered at me from the doorway, then squeezed his way past and hurried up the stairs, followed by his flabby wife. They hadn't even turned thirty, and they were falling apart. They really ought to take better care of themselves, I thought.

The newlyweds, a middle-aged guy and his wife, were next, Greg and Greer. They had a lot of teeth between them. They weren't much older than I was, but they were recently retired and talked constantly about a gift shop they were going to open near Monterey or Carmel. Other than that, they kept mostly to themselves. They had matching shades of pre-

maturely gray hair and matching outfits and always looked camera-ready for some clothing catalogue layout. I never did figure out how they managed that crisp appearance in the cramped and dank atmosphere below decks. And they were always so darned cheerful!

I stretched for another ten minutes, and checked the dressing on the fishhook wound I'd received a few days earlier. An inexperienced and over-eager angler had snagged my arm on the backswing, and had kept yanking and yanking until the hook was set deep in my tricep. Dr. Flood, another of the passengers, had forced the barbed point through the skin and clipped it off with wirecutters. So far it didn't look infected.

I was postponing my inevitable appearance in the dining room. I was starving, but I didn't like the idea of being wedged next to Ralph again at one of the three available booths. I looked in on Mother, but she had just barely started to put on her face. I don't wear makeup myself, and if I did, I wouldn't on this trip. But try to tell that to Gin.

When I couldn't wait any longer, I headed upstairs and onto deck. The *Mystic Queen* rocked at anchor several miles from the Baja coast. A half mile off the bow lay one of the un-

inhabited San Benito islands. The brisk salt air and the alluring aromas from the dining room were overpowering, and I finally succumbed.

"Hey, Carrot-top, over here!"

As luck would have it, the only available seat was opposite Ralph and his wife. It was three days to port; I knew I couldn't fast that long. I sighed and slid into the booth.

Ralph's nose was slathered in a protective coating of zinc oxide as thick as cake icing. A random gob of the white goo stuck to the sparse, spiderleg-like, translucent hairs that he probably called a mustache. *Bon appetit!*

"Is that sunscreen on your nose, or are you just glad to see me?" I said.

"How's that, Carrot-top?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but haven't we been over this before? The name is Heather MacKenzie."

"But Carrot-top is so much more descriptive, don't you think?" he laughed. "I mean, with your weird diet and all."

Flabby Thighs, his wife, smirked and thumbed through a dogeared copy of *Peterson's Field Guide to Western Birds*. They were from somewhere in Ohio and were obsessed with completing their "Life Lists," which would mean they'd seen every known bird in the world.

"Yes, I'm a vegetarian. I do

eat carrots, and my hair is red. But the name is Heather."

Most of my close friends call me Mac, but Ralph had a very long way to go before that happened. I could have insisted that he call me Miss MacKenzie. I got a hostile look on my face just thinking about it.

"Hey, whatcha got against us carnivores, anyway?"

"Nothing. I made my choice for both ethical and health reasons."

"Yeah, yeah. We've been through that drill before."

"You've done little to persuade me that I'm wrong."

One of the crewmen was doubling as waiter that morning, and he stopped to take my order. By now several of the passengers had identified me as the lone vegetarian and therefore a *de facto* nut case. Sure, I feel strongly about it, but I'm not pushy. It's my choice, and I know I can't convince anybody of anything until they're ready to be convinced.

I'd had a short conference with the cook before we left port in San Diego, and we reviewed his menu. We decided that if I doubled up on the vegetable side dishes I'd have plenty of nourishment as long as I didn't mind "cheating" with a little butter once in a while, since that was all he cooked with. I decided I could live with that under the circumstances. Life

is full of compromises. Like the two restaurants where I work: the Blockade Runner is strictly a prime-rib-and-booze place, while the Spa is more bean-sprouts-and-rainwater. Sometimes I joke that one place pays my rent, the other feeds my soul.

Ralph elbowed the crewman in the thigh. "What I want to know is, can I have Carrot, I mean Heather's, pork sausage ration?" The crewman nodded coolly.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"If you don't care," I said. "It does seem strange, though."

"What does?" said Flabby Thighs, defensively.

"That you both 'love' nature so much that you travel the world counting species of birds, and you drop some serious money on this trip to commune with the whales, who happen to be mammals just like us."

The crewman brought me a double stack of buckwheat cakes and slid four charred and wizened grease sticks in front of Ralph.

"I still don't get it," he said, spearing a sausage and plunging it greedily into his mouth.

"Ralph, you're a mammal who supposedly loves mammals, and you're eating a mammal right now."

Ralph paused for a moment in mid-chew, then continued.

"Hey, that's the way it's sup-

posed to be with us carnivores."

My mind raced ahead to the next argument, that our digestive system isn't built like a carnivore's. It can't process flesh as efficiently as it does vegetable matter. But digestive juices were one thing I didn't want to discuss with Ralph, not while either of us was eating.

Earlier in the trip I'd had the misfortune to sit opposite Ralph at mealtime for two days running, during choppy seas. When he found out I was into powerlifting, he couldn't leave it alone. How much could I benchpress, how much could I squat—not ideal dinner conversation for the uninitiated. I was sure I could outlift him any day. He had fifty pounds on me, but most of that was hanging over his belt.

On those days, Ralph started each meal brash and loud, then midway through he was silent, introspective, and slightly green. Anyone else would have immediately headed for the rail and some fresh air. Not Ralph. He insisted he wasn't seasick, and kept insisting, right up to the very moment he vomited, once on his own plate, and the other time on his wife. Never got any on himself, though.

He wasn't popular with the cleanup crew after that second time. And it had nothing to do with his being a carnivore.

It hadn't improved my

mother's appetite either, although to her credit, she never got seasick. She had a supply of those motion sickness patches to wear behind her ear. She did refuse to sit at the same table with Ralph, or even to face any table where he sat for the rest of the voyage.

Luckily, my tablemates decided to shove off, and I was able to work my way through most of the buckwheat stack alone before Maya Culp slid into the booth opposite me. She was tall and tan, and at thirty-two, she was still lean and mean enough to make a fair showing in a few of the South Bay volleyball tournaments when she wasn't sailing around the world or working on her Ph.D. in marine biology. On my best day, I'd never beaten her. But then I was giving away a three year age advantage and about six inches in height. I consoled myself with the fact that she was probably too tall for powerlifting, and out of my weight class in any event.

"Hey, Mac, ready for shore leave?" she smiled.

"As much as I love the whales, I've been ready for two days. How do you stand it week after week?"

"It's a job," she shrugged.

"You love it. You're doing what you want to do," I said, trying to keep the envy out of my voice.

"Yeah, well. I got some news from the skipper. Remember when we had to move you and your mother and the two bird-brains to different cabins?"

"It's hard to forget waking up in a pitch black, cramped, airless room that is throbbing in time with a diesel engine that's bolted inches from my head."

"Good point," she grinned. "That's one reason why the crew sleeps forward, it's quieter."

"The privileges of rank."

"Yeah, well. Anyway, they were checking the air vents yesterday when everyone was out on the lagoon. And what do you think they found?"

"A dead body crammed in the air passage."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mac, but this isn't one of your murder investigations."

"There's only been one," I said. She was referring to that little case of my overhearing too much in the back bar of the Blockade Runner last summer and then acting out my super-sleuth fantasies.

"You're lucky to be alive, you know."

I knew.

"Anyway, it wasn't a body, just a lot of junk."

"Junk happens."

"Well, it doesn't happen in the air ducts, not this kind of junk. Did you hear anything suspicious earlier that night?"

"Maya, I doubt that I could have heard anything at all except that diesel engine."

She nodded. "Well, someone unscrewed a plate on the bulkhead and shoved all the junk in there. They must have done it right before you noticed the problem."

"Who could the mischievous saboteur be?" I asked with a conspiratorial wink.

Maya smiled a perfect smile.

"No one got hurt and nothing mechanical was damaged," she said. "Whoever it was, she or he is a fairly harmless prankster."

"Right! No one died and had to be buried at sea. Which brings up an interesting question. If Ralph had to be buried at sea, could Greenpeace or someone charge the *Mystic Queen* with ocean pollution, or endangering bottom feeders, or something?"

Maya smiled. "There are a couple of crewmen who would be happy to act as pallbearers. He certainly gave the term "sea-food" a whole new meaning."

"Enough about Ralph. Let's talk about something important. What kind of junk was it?"

"It was a cardboard box taken from the galley, but the cook and crew don't remember anyone taking it. And it was full of somebody's souvenirs: gobs of those scallop shells we saw during our nature walk on the far side of the lagoon, some dolphin bones, small pieces of drift-

wood, and a variety of succulents—all the plants we passed during that excursion. You know the eco-system out here is very fragile."

"I know."

"And one of the guys found a similar package stowed beneath the tackle boxes aft."

"But taking those things is a major no-no, *si*?" I asked. "Leave only snapshots, take only footprints, isn't that what you're always saying?"

"Not quite. It makes more sense the other way around, and I know you're joking, but we mean it. It's not the crime of the century, but it goes against my philosophy, and more important, against the ship's agreement with the Mexican government."

"The Federales!"

"Yeah, I know," she laughed. "We don't need no stinking badges . . . But seriously, we do need a social and ecological conscience. If all the *turistas* on every whale-watching tour ship took a box of souvenir rocks from these islands, and left an equal amount of debris like the orange peels and beer cans I'm always picking up, it wouldn't take long before the whole place looked about as pristine as Fluffy's old cat box."

"A fairly low pristine quotient, that," I said, wrinkling my nose. "So who do you think did it?"

"The problem is, it could have been anyone. I'm going to see that this stuff gets back where it belongs, but I'm wondering how much more is squirreled away. And it's awkward to accuse anyone at this point. You all wear knapsacks when we go ashore, for cameras, water, whatever. I can't keep an eye on everyone, or strip-search them when they come back aboard."

"Well, if I can help, let me know."

"Thanks, and I am. Letting you know, that is."

"Anyone in particular you want me to tail?"

"Your old buddies the bird-brains tend to wander off ostensibly in search of rare species."

"True, but everyone wanders a little. I don't think any of us are used to such close quarters. We all go a little daffy on shore."

"Just watch for anything suspicious, and if you find it, try not to get sapped, or shanghaied, or whatever usually happens to meddlesome amateur snoops."

By ten A.M. the skiffs had been lowered into the water, the outboard motors were attached, and the crew was helping the first passengers down the rope ladders. It was a sunny day, but the passengers were dressed in their raingear to protect against

the constant ocean spray and the chilling winds. Everyone wore orange flotation vests over yellow slickers and overalls except for a couple of crewmen in black and blue wetsuits and, of course, my mother in shiny pink plastic. She said her vest was too bulky and the bright orange clashed with her outfit, but to her credit she quit complaining about it after the first day.

The crewmen liked my mother, probably because she didn't even pretend to know anything, especially anything nautical. She'd had a lifetime of practice at being helpless, and it all went to good use here. I think little Dr. Flood, a widower from Whittier, was trying to make a move on her. He was jostling his way into line next to her so they could be on the same skiff for the shuttle to West San Benito Island. Jeff and the other crewman practically carried my mother down the ladder as she held her body rigid and shut her eyes. She might be helpless, but she has guts. She could have elected to stay on board once in a while, like some of the other ladies her age, but she never did. Her attitude was: since she was on this primitive expedition, she was going to do it all.

Dr. Flood extended a hand to steady her as she sat down next to him on the skiff's pontoon

railing. The birdbrains sat huddled on the other rail. A full boat. I climbed down unassisted and took the point position in the last skiff. Maya joined me.

The crewmen like to race for the shore as soon as all the skiffs are loaded. Most of the passengers like it, too. Our skiff won easily by thirty seconds. Maya hopped out in the knee-deep water and helped our crewman tow the skiff to shore. The beach was covered with small smooth stones that continued down the gentle slope beneath the water's edge. Maya and the crewman held the skiff steady against the incoming breakers so we could 'hop out with dry feet. I wasn't about to squish around all day in soggy hiking boots.

While we regrouped on shore, and I reveled in the feel of solid ground, the unloading continued. Ralph and his wife were fumbling around on the floor of the skiff looking for something they had dropped, and Dr. Flood was already on shore trying to lend a hand to my mother as she wobbled around trying to step over the rail. The single crewman struggled to steady the skiff. Just as Mother's foot touched shore, a wave surged in and tipped the skiff sideways, clipping her behind the knees and dumping the birdbrains and the skiff on top of her.

By the time I got to her, the doctor and the crewman were digging her out. Her leg was in pain, but she was also embarrassed at becoming the center of attention in such a graceless way. As she sat awkwardly on the stones, I helped her slip off her pink raingear. Maya and Dr. Flood checked her legs for fractures.

"Nothing broken that I can see, probably just a sprain," said Dr. Flood. "But then I don't see too many fractures in my line of work. I'm a urologist, you know."

Everyone knew. He had made a point of telling us many times. He'd used the same line on me when he removed the fishhook from my arm. I should hope urologists don't see many fishhooks in the line of duty!

The whole group stood around removing their raingear and life jackets while we made Mother comfortable. The pain wasn't bad if she sat still, and now she was enjoying the extra attention. She insisted upon staying there on the beach while we toured the island.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be all right," she sighed theatrically.

The group, except for the good doctor and me, took her at her word, and immediately trudged off over the hills. Dr. Flood hung around for a minute, but when he saw that I

wasn't budging right away, he hurried after them. Mother insisted again that she would be fine, and I fussed over her a little, but there wasn't much I could do. I wasn't used to fussing anyway. I asked if she'd heard any strange noises two nights ago.

"Strange noises? I'm not a mechanic, dear. All I could hear was that dreadful motor, and if it was acting up, I'm sure I couldn't tell you why."

She fluffed up her knapsack and settled in. I told her about my conversation with Maya, and she facetiously promised to take a full inventory of all the seashells within her reach.

She would be okay for a few hours, I thought. I adjusted my knapsack and jogged up the hill after the others.

There were several secluded rocky inlets on the island that were the breeding grounds and nurseries for elephant seals. Maya lectured the group sternly about our conduct around them. Snapshots were okay, but we weren't to try to walk among them, or harass them in any way. She was looking at Ralph as she spoke, and with good reason. On our last excursion, he'd been flipping pebbles at a roosting pelican, and when he was caught, he shrugged it off. He was just trying to get an innocent "action shot."

Maya led the way, pointing out rock formations and tossing out the correct names of all the birds that flew by and all the indigenous vegetation we passed. We paused and watched an osprey hover offshore on beating wings before plunging feet first into the sea to seize an unsuspecting fish with its talons.

"The osprey is also known as the sea eagle," she said, "but it is actually a large hawk."

The distinction was lost on me. I doubted that it made much difference to the fish writhing below the powerful bird as it flew away.

Maya was on automatic pilot after so many tours, but she was good and she took her time. I eyed the crowd for a clue to Maya's souvenir packrat, but I came up empty.

It didn't take long to cross the entire island. When we topped the rise, the land fell away in a series of irregular cliffs. It was a twenty foot drop to the rockstrewn sandy cove, home for two dozen elephant seals. They were mostly clusters of females lying on their stomachs or sides, basking in the sun, their seemingly inadequate flippers occasionally fanning away the sand fleas.

"They look like giant slugs."

"They do not! They're cute!"

"And they're all wearing sealskin coats."

Two gigantic males slowly dragged themselves around on their foreflippers. The bulls had the big bag of loose skin hanging over their upper lips that gave them their name. If I was very imaginative, I could see how it might be compared to an elephant's trunk. Very imaginative.

Maya explained that there were several such coves around this island and that we would eventually work our way around to the others. Since this was the tour's first photo opportunity of the day, and it looked as if we'd be there for a while, I dutifully clicked through a roll of Kodachrome and then sat on the rocks, out of the wind, to bask in the sun.

It wasn't long before the group was strung out along the coastline bluffs farther than I could see. Most of those I could see were in groups of two or three, strolling along or staring out to sea . . . as if they hadn't seen enough ocean in the last week. Maya was tied up with two of the older ladies who I knew from experience could keep her occupied for hours.

I also knew that every one of the passengers, myself included, would be smuggling a few pounds of sand back on board inside our sneakers.

I decided to work off the rest of breakfast with a jog around the island, and combine that

with some informal surveillance. I tightened my laces, waved to Maya, and headed out.

The island was small and uninhabited, but a network of paths was worn in the rocky soil, probably partly by previous tour groups but also by the Mexican fishermen who stayed there during the season. Their primitive shacks were intended as temporary shelters and they stood empty now, surrounded by the detritus of years of transient bachelor living. For fishermen, men who caught fresh food for a living, they sure ate a lot of canned stuff, judging by the size of the junkpiles.

I was beginning to warm up as I jogged. I slowed myself as the path pitched downward, no point in overdoing it. Low, windswept dunes opened onto a shallow, dish-shaped cove. No elephant seals there. The sandy beach was strewn with driftwood, rotting seaweed, and space-age flotsam: sunbleached marker buoys, shattered slabs of Styrofoam, sixpack collars, and plastic pop bottles. Ah, civilization!

Greg and Greer, those photogenic newlyweds, were facing seaward, arm in arm, enjoying the solitude, dreamily beachcombing their way through the mess. They were in their own world—probably didn't even

notice the horrendous smell. I pushed on. If all the shipboard passengers hauled back a knapsack full of that junk, it would scarcely have made a dent in the debris. And after the next ocean storm, there would be new piles of crud on the beach.

I doubled back toward the landing and jogged along the sand. There was driftwood everywhere. I wondered where it all came from. I hadn't seen trees that big on the island, or on the nearby Mexican coast either. Another mystery of the sea.

A few minutes later, I could see my mother still propped up near the skiffs. She seemed overly animated when she saw me approaching so I stepped up my pace, which wasn't easy on the uneven ground.

"Heather Rose," she shouted, "you've got to follow them, the game is afoot!"

"Really, Mother," I puffed, "the game is afoot? And I left my deerstalker cap on the mantel next to my calabash pipe."

"Make fun of an old invalid if you wish. I'm sure you know all the latest criminal jargon better than I. But I know they went thataway."

"Who, Mother?"

"Revolted Ralph and that hideous crone he calls his life-mate. They're up to no good, I'm sure. And if they aren't, they're undoubtedly guilty of some-

thing. I sent Buster to get the goods on them."

"Buster?"

"Oh, you know, Dr. Flood. He wants me to call him Buster."

I rolled my eyes.

"I think he's attracted to me," she continued, "not that I'd ever really consider..."

I didn't want to consider it right now, either. I sprinted off in the direction Mother had indicated, not sure what I'd find. Ralph was disgusting, but unfortunately that still wasn't a crime as far as I knew.

It took about fifteen minutes of steady jogging before I got close. On that side of the island, the land rose sharply away from the shore in a broad bluff topped with rocky crags. I paused again to catch my breath, I was warm and my muscles were beginning to loosen up. One gray-white crag dominated in the distance, and three human figures at its base were gesturing wildly. I could already make out Ralph's white beak; the smaller man had to be Dr. Flood. Add Flabby Thighs hunkered over a video camera and I'd found Buster and the birdbrains.

In a sudden fit of aggression, Ralph shoved Dr. Flood backwards, and the older man skidded partway down the slope on his butt. The doctor didn't appear hurt, but physically he

was no match for Ralph. I loped toward them while Ralph's wife calmly set up the camera tripod and Ralph began to scale the towering crag.

As I drew nearer I could see it wasn't a stone crag at all. I'd listened closely enough to Maya's lectures the past week to recognize it as an osprey nest. The perch offered a sweeping view of ocean, and it was close to nature's grocery store when it was time to feed the nestlings. According to Maya, the osprey often uses the same nest again and again, adding more branches each year. This was no twigs-and-bits-of-yarn nest. It was baseball bat-sized pieces of bleached driftwood stacked and woven together to form an oil derrick-shaped tower twelve feet high. When I came to a halt, Ralph, a camera dangling from his neck, was struggling to find a foothold about halfway up the tower on the cliff side.

Dr. Flood seemed embarrassed when he saw me. Ralph's wife stepped into my path and raised her soft arm as if to slap me. I grabbed her open hand and bent it backward, and she went to her knees. I wasn't even trying.

"What do you think you're doing, Ralph?" I shouted over the ocean's roar. He had no business messing around there.

He didn't answer, and I

couldn't blame him; all his concentration was on the climb, wrong as it was. A thirty foot drop stretched below him down the eroded cliffside to the beach. I glanced down again.

Seven or eight elephant seals were basking below on rocks littered with driftwood. At one end of the sandy strip a single bull was busy servicing one of them . . . one of his harem. It looked as if he was crushing her. Hey, lose some weight, buddy! I thought.

Ralph had just reached the top, but he slipped a little when a stick came loose. He'd almost regained his balance when, I swear, a fish hit him in the face and he fell over backwards. Which is the best thing that could have happened to him because a very inhospitable, dive-bombing osprey shrieked in anger and made a bare-taloned pass just inches from where his head had been.

Not that Ralph was completely lucky. He was still clutching his "piece of the nest" when he crashed flat on his back on a sandy spot of beach. The impact knocked him cold and startled a couple of elephant seal maids. They howled in terror and backed defensively against the cliff; Ralph's inert form and a massive driftwood corral blocked their only route to the sea. Roused by their cries, the old bull seal bel-

lowed and started toward the foolish intruder.

Natural justice dictated that I stand back and watch Ralph receive the Darwinian reward he so richly deserved. But in the end I couldn't.

I'm sure elephant seals are fast and graceful in the water, and they can move faster on land than you'd suspect, but without legs, they're not very good broken field runners. The old guy had to detour around some of the larger driftwood logs, which gave me time to slide on my heels down the eroded cliff to a spot on the beach. Now the seal sisters had something else to be frightened of, and they increased their wails, which spurred the big guy on to greater speed. There was no way I could get behind them to herd them out past Ralph.

By now, Ralph was stirring a little, but he was in no shape to sit up, let alone run, and I didn't want to hurt the seals—it was their home after all. I had to do something and quick.

The big bull crashed through the last major driftwood barrier between him and Ralph, and had only twenty yards to go. I had one chance to free the girls and stop the big bull's rampage. I planted my feet in the moist sand and searched for a handhold on the top log of the driftwood corral. What was the

proper lifting technique for a twenty foot long, two foot diameter log? I had no idea. I strained against its weight and sank halfway to my knees in the sand.

Quickly I scrambled on top, found a firm footing on an underlying log, and managed to straddle the top one and deadlift it a scant six inches. My knees were still bent, and I was able to cheat the log toward the ocean before I let it go. I prayed that it wouldn't fall back into place, and I shoved one way while hopping the other. The log crashed loose from the log jam and bounced once toward the bull before its stubby tangle of branches caught in the sand, bringing the bull up short. With the barrier lowered, the girls could see the ocean and they slithered free toward the waves. Since his damsels were in distress no longer, the old bull calmed down some, although he continued to stand his ground.

Now that the dust had cleared, Dr. Flood picked his way carefully down the cliff and pronounced Ralph acutely stupid, but otherwise fit for travel.

"I'd have to be a proctologist to make a totally accurate diagnosis in this case, if you understand my meaning," he said.

We could see Flabby Thighs screaming frantically at the top of the cliff, but we were in luck—between the ocean and

the wind, we couldn't hear a word.

And after a few minutes, the old bull tired of us, decided it was party time again, and loped off toward the girls. When Ralph was able to sit up on his own, I trotted back to the landing to find Maya.

In the end, there was no mystery, unless you consider the tangled circuits that prompt human impulses. Why do people continue to destroy the things they claim to love? Why is the very act of loving something wild often the first step in its demise? How can a "nature lover" loot the wilderness of its irreplaceable beauty?

Don't ask Ralph. He finally admitted stashing the souvenirs in the air vent, which had nearly suffocated him as well as me, and was very upset when Maya wouldn't let him keep them. As if an admission of guilt automatically entitled him to forgiveness and clear title to the loot.

His wife was talking lawsuit the last I heard. I don't think she has a case, but if it ever comes to a head, I'll pull in

some markers, as they say, and see that the *Mystic Queen* gets the representation it deserves.

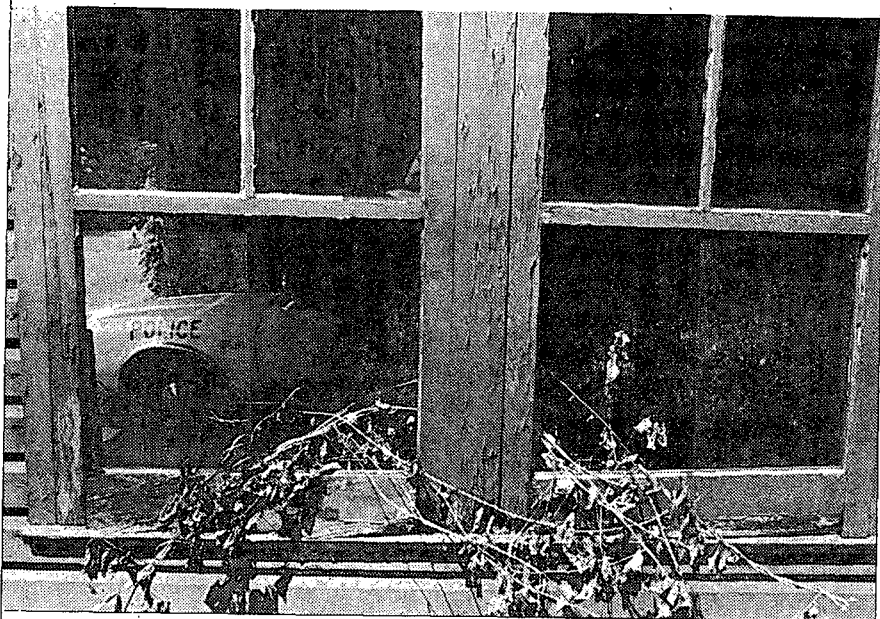
The rest of our trip went by quickly. There was a hard day of cruising, if you call pounding through the waves cruising, from the time we pulled anchor until we arrived around three A.M. off Ensenada to clear customs.

Mother spent the rest of the trip enthroned in one of the dining room booths attended by Dr. Buster Flood. I doubt that he'll be sending her a bill. Maya Culp logged another notch in her pursuit of a doctorate. And I spent most of my time on the bow staring out into the darkness and the flickering lights on shore.

I'd gone to Mexico to commune with Mother Nature and to get closer to my mother. Now that it was almost over, I wasn't sure I'd accomplished either goal. I wasn't even sure that either of them wanted to be closer to me, or would be the better for the contact.

A little after dawn the *Mystic Queen* was back in American waters and a school of dolphins raced recklessly along the bow, pointing us toward home.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Car trouble: We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Recumbent Among Lilies

by Jas. R. Petrin



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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She didn't like to think about murder.

She was a peaceful woman with a light and gentle hand. You could tell that from her collection, a delicate assortment of porcelain and ceramics, to which she was devoted. Beginning on the lowest shelf of her cabinet and rising accordingly with value, were her Coalport soup plates, Derby butter tub, Royal Worcester American Eagle platter. Above that her Ralph Wood tea bowl and saucer and Schlaggenwald poodle. Then her Meissen yellow tiger tureen. And at the center of the topmost shelf, the spot of greatest honor, was her Staffordshire loving cup (pewter-mount, gilt-border, rare).

John had built the collection for her. A new piece every couple of weeks. Such a dear.

Only one other object in the room was as carefully placed, and that was the telephone. It rang now. She'd hardly put her ear to it before she was sorry. It was Annie Kenessy running with the bit between her teeth.

"Don't you dare hang up on me, Mrs. Fox-White."

"I won't, Annie. Long as you don't yell."

"Am I yelling? Do I sound like I'm yelling? When I start YELLING, Mrs. Fox-White, you won't need ME to tell you that's what I'm doing. You won't need

a telephone, neither. Just an open window, and I'll take your socks off from here with one BLAST."

"Why are you calling, Annie?"

"Why am I calling? I'll tell you why I'm calling. I'm calling about these letters you keep sending in to the *Tribune*. That last one was awful. Just awful. Saying that Betty Roslin's killer, if they ever catch him, ought to be understood and treated kindly, and given over to the hospitals to have his poor scrambled-egg wits put back into the shell..."

"Look, Mrs. Kenessy—"

"I'd sort his wits out for him. Yes, I would! With a few thousand volts of electricity. A few million, maybe. Black out every TV from here to Lockport. Like a signal. So folks would know when to breathe easy again."

"There's no electric chair here, Mrs. Kenessy—"

"Zap him like that poor dope in the Batman movie. Nothing left but a frazzle and a grin..."

"Mrs. Kenessy—"

"After that I'd gas him. Then I'd hang him. And then I'd drag what's left of him out of town behind a car and tie him down over an ant hill and watch him squirm."

"Mrs. Kenessy—"

"And then I'd slap him."

"Violence don't answer violence, Annie Kenessy!"

"Violence! Who cares about violence? Violence ain't the point. I want satisfaction, that's what I want. That's what the whole town wants, case you hadn't noticed. I'm not the only one. Sharing a town's like sharing a bathtub, sharp toenails aren't welcome. So just you remember *that* next time you put your Dr. Freud hat on and start writing letters!"

The phone went dead with a bang that made Mrs. Fox-White look to her collection with concern; hadn't that teapot shivered?

"Hope she feels better," said Mrs. Fox-White, "now she's got that off her chest."

She put her Zamfir tape into the stereo and pressed *Play*; lovely and haunting, the TV ads had described it, and she had ordered it instantly, and it was.

Then she hurried about her chores. She meant to have her hair done today. John had invited her over for one of their private dinners (she went secretly with John because he wanted it that way), and she was looking forward to tonight, and maybe John would have a platter or a tea bowl for her, and she sure as heck wasn't going to let Annie Kenessy spoil it all with a blather of bitter words.

Nobody knew. That was the thing. Nobody in town could say who was the guilty one, the one who stood shadow silent in midnight lanes, slunk catlike past silent deadbolted houses, watched unseen from darkened shrubbery—and then struck.

But there had been three funerals in the town of WestBrook in as many months, and twelve-year-old Jeff Mills meant to make darn sure he wasn't served up front and center, with flowers, as number four.

So he ran.

No one in WestBrook could catch Jeff Mills when he got in a hurry. Not Sam Reese, who now drank beer under the loading dock at Beaver Soaps but who had once won a medal for the hundred yard dash. Not Luba Moony, the wild girl, who could gallop like a horse. Not even Harvey Hamilton, who could beat it to third base without fail before his line drive rattled off the chain link at the back of the schoolyard fence.

The soles of Jeff's hurrying Nikes beat a quick, quiet rhythm against the warm, late evening sidewalk, and he left a hundred stranglers panting in his wake.

He shouldn't have stayed so long at Kelly's. He knew it. But

that was the price of investigative journalism. They'd got going so well on the newsletter they planned to publish that the minutes had flashed by like headlines, and so here he was, running for his life. His mother would be furious.

Rounding the corner he found himself pelting up his own back lane. He should have gone the front way. Force of habit, that's what it was. He always took this route on his way home from Kelly's. In daylight.

It was a long lane and a dark one. Keeping to its center, he picked up his pace. He was breathing hard now. The dark continent of Mrs. Wiebe's gloomy lilac jungle swept past. Then Bodnar's back drive, a grey bog. Now Mr. Lang's garden. Munt's garage. Only fifty yards to go. He began bearing to his right. And then he tripped.

He tripped because he had to jump. He jumped because he had to clear the arm that was jutting out into the lane from under the Schellenbergs' garbage stoop. He had to clear the arm because if he didn't the hand at the end of it would surely seize him by the leg and drag him under the stoop and murder him.

He rolled through air, connected with concrete, and screamed.

Things happened fast after that. Back yard lights winking on, heads poking over fences, strong arms lifting him as Constable Bill Wheeler clambered out of his cruiser car all grim looks and uniform. The car's rotating roof light painted a dozen fearful faces up and down the lane with its red electric winks.

A block away the hunter hurried, too. He had to move fast. There'd been the running footsteps, and he'd leaped up quick and darted, only just making it into the black of the canyon between two houses by the time he heard the scream. His heart was still hammering.

Close. Too close. Almost caught. Still, it had been a fine hunt, yes, yes, oh yes, yes!

A silly girl. Foolish. Anxious as all the others to help him with directions. He had spotted her alone at the Salisbury lunch bar, then followed her into the lane. Wild, they called her. She had turned at his call and waited for him under the sodium lights, grinning. She had still been grinning when his reaching hands took her by the throat, still grinning while he squeezed; and she had grinned all the way down to the ground as if she thought it was an exceptionally fine joke he'd played on her.

More fool her. There were no jokes in the jungle.

He fished a sprig of cloves from his pocket and slipped it under his lip; it was a hard thing, quitting cigarettes.

A commotion was in progress in the lane a block behind him. Lights, voices, sirens. He ducked into the car with his cap pulled over his eyes, looked at his hands resting on the wheel, palms up, fingers slightly curved, trembling. It was always so—before and after. He made those fingers tremble the cassette out from under the seat, and tremble it into the player.

Music filled the car.

His favorite. "Some Enchanted Evening..."

"I suppose you realize," his father said, frowning over the clutter of breakfast, "that it could have been you grabbed and strangled and stuffed under that fence."

They had let Jeff sleep late. His ankle throbbing dully, he crept from the kitchen doorway and slunk to a chair, braced for the storm of parental wrath that must surely descend. Silent, his mother served him waffles. Silent, his father continued to study him.

Jeff hung his head miserably. Any moment, he thought, the tirade, the roar, the inevitable

punishment. But his father only sat glowering with a pale and unsettled face.

His mother spoke first, all trembly. "Eat your breakfast, Jeff."

And that was it. Just a parting remark from his mother as he hobbled out of the house: "Don't go down Ryerson Street if you're off to Kelly Walker's house—you know what a gossip that Annie Kenessy is, and you've given her plenty to talk about already."

He limped out into Saturday sunshine.

Kelly Jay Walker, grey eyes calm and alert, listened while Jeff gave him the story. A sign by his computer said "THIMK!" Jeff told Kelly everything, including how he had given a statement in the police car, which Bill Wheeler took down on a notepad with black covers. "I had to initial it," Jeff said.

Kelly seemed put out. "I never sat in a police car before." Then he added, "What was it like?"

"Neat. Two-way radio, computer—"

"I mean the body. What was the body like?"

"I dunno. I only saw one arm."

"Wild Luba Moony," said Kelly, whistling. "Who'd of thought anybody could catch her? She could run like—"

"Like a horse."

"Yeah."

"Guess whoever got her can run like a horse, too."

"Guess so."

They stared at the blinking cursor on the screen of Kelly's computer, thinking about all the fast-running people they knew who might have been a match for Miss Moony.

"We could do a story on it," Kelly said. "Too bad you weren't there sooner. Too bad you didn't actually see something."

"Too bad I didn't get stranded. I'd of been a big help to you then."

"Humm," said Kelly, brooding over the too-small block of amber text glowing on the screen.

Cable News Network had nothing on Annie Kenessy. What she didn't know about current events wasn't worth knowing. And if she didn't, and it was, she'd take a run at it anyway and fill in the missing parts. She still felt good about the blast she'd given that sappy Mrs. Fox-White. Her and her precious ceramics. Bunch of junk. Where'd she get that stuff, anyway? The phone rang and she swept it up in a glow of civic accomplishment.

Hope Morrisette's voice. "Annie? It's me."

"That so? And what 'me' is that? Barbara Walters wanting an interview? Lady Di setting

up a lunch? Cher looking for the Lost Chord and wondering if it might of slipped down my sofa cushions on her last visit? Heck, there's so many of you 'me' folks around, a person don't know what to expect."

"Oh, Annie! It's Hope Morrisette."

"That me. Ought to of guessed. Rust in my ESP. It ain't worth beans when I've just washed my hair."

"Oh, Annie! Don't kid. Don't tease. Here I am just *itching* to hear about last night. About what happened in the lane. I'm just—"

"Dying to know, are you?"

"—dying to know about that body. The body of poor Miss Moony."

"Oh, *that* body. Glad you told me. I never would of known, what with all the other bodies piled up under the Schellenbergs' fence. Stacks of 'em there. Like cordwood."

"Stop *teasing*, Annie, and hurry up and tell."

"All right. Guess I could go over it *one* more time. Guess my voice'll hold out for *one* more telling. But just for you. Don't pass it on to that Weeping Winnie, Mrs. Fox-White. *She's* got a strange notion on free speech, that one. Her and her dishes."

"She's peaceful, though."

"So's a rock. Or a log. Till it falls on you."

She told Hope Morrisette all

she knew, and a little more besides, filling in around the edges where her story was thin and the meaning leaked out. Hope listened, breathing quick little breaths like Deke Thurston's rat-faced Mexican hairless.

"And then our great protector Constable Bill Wheeler flags the ambulance through, screaming — the ambulance screaming, not Bill. Don't ask *me* why it had to scream, Miss Moony weren't complaining, but they got a new siren bolted on, so I guess they want to give us taxpayers value — new wiggles, too, whatever *they* are. I got that last bit from Frank Streeter, who got it from his brother Joel who reads the meter down at the Husky station when he isn't face down by an empty bottle—"

"And how *was* our Bill? Can he find who did it?"

"Bill? Pooh! Bill couldn't find his foot in a sock. Strutting like a *Miami Vice* re-run, all damn-fool questions. I told him to get busy, and he got all soapy, practically *begged* me to solve the case for him. 'Maybe *you* can do better,' he says, showing all his dental work. Poor man. Ball of nerves. Fit to explode. One day the top of his little bald head will fly off, wait and see if it don't, like the top of a softboiled egg."

She paused. The Mexican hairless breathed up the line.

Mrs. Kenessy said, "Dunno know why he thinks *I* ought to solve his cases for him."

Mrs. Morrisette said:

"Well . . . Fact is, some the girls are saying that, too . . ."

Mrs. Kenessy came to attention. "What's that about the girls? Not that Mrs. Fox-White?"

"No, not her. The good ones, the ones we like. They think you *should* get busy and find that Strangler. Especially after the letter Mrs. Fox-White wrote, defending him. Time he's caught, he'll have a fan club. You can do it. I mean, there's not much goes on in West Brook *you* don't know about—except this."

Except this! Tiny words. But they caromed off Annie like two slaps in the side of the head.

She hung up, sat in her chair in her front bay window, and stared out through her sheers at Ryerson Street.

"By God, I'm on the chopping block here," she said. Her cat Boodles, sitting attentively on the window ledge as if he were a student of hers, switched the tip of his tail. "I mean, I got a reputation, don't I? If *I* don't know who's going around the town wringing necks like Colonel Sanders at a chicken ranch, then what the heck *do* I know, answer me that, will you?"

Boodles didn't answer.

"I'd best knuckle down and get at it," she said.

Boodles didn't reply.

"Find me that Strangler."

Boodles said nothing at all.

Mrs. Kenessy took no calls the rest of that day. All afternoon she sat in her chair behind the sheers and watched the townspeople come and go, come and go, hurrying, scurrying down Ryerson Street . . .

"Look at 'em. Wanting their doin's all done before sundown. Like in a horror film. Not knowin' who to suspect, not knowin' which way to look to see the end of their life comin' at 'em with fingers thick as smoked wieners."

The victims were all women, but that cut no ice. This was mindless violence, pure and simple. Work of a crazed person. So who in town was crazed? Who violent?

There was Bud Sawchuk. If he wasn't crazed, they might as well take and cross the word out. Any brain he had was at home on a shelf. And violent? He once chased a cat splang through the Parkdale Mall with a fence board. Would of caught it, too, but for Mrs. Whitehead's shopping cart (she liked cats) knocking him crash-splash into the Shriners' wishing well pond with a cracked rib and a scream. He was rigid when they dragged him out; they had to pry the pennies out of his fists with a

spoon. He'd been quiet since, but might this be his comeback? If so, why hadn't he strangled Mrs. Whitehead right off, or at least drowned her in the Shriners' pond? Puzzles.

Then you had old Mrs. Prefontaine—Mrs. Pref, as the kids called her.

Now there was a woman didn't come with a full set of maps, either. Blew up at the neighbor kids once. Driven to it, she claimed, by the *pock-pock-pock* of a basketball under her window. Went after 'em at a dead run with her garden hose, dousing down their Chip and Peppers and the seats of their red-tag Levis. Had them shrieking like geese at a dogfight till her allotment of hose run out, dropping her flat on her back, unconscious. She'd got famous from that. Every kid passing her house now chanted, "*Pref, Pref, what's the beef?*"

But the murder victims were grownups.

She thought some more. Thought about Sly Hepner. Another strange piece of work. All runny nose, sloppy hat, and grin. Nut case. Man bites dog. You wouldn't show the back of your head to *him* in a room full of blunt instruments. But Sly wasn't the strangling type. More apt to clip you with a brick.

There were plenty of others, too.

One name surfaced more and

more often in the sea of possibilities swirling in her mind. She'd been ignoring it, reeling in the ones that bobbed the highest. Now she reached in up to the elbow and pulled the pesky name out, dripping.

The name was a simple one.

Brown.

Brown the mystery man.

Mr. Brown—he gave no first name—had come to town almost a year ago. Retired gentleman. Retired from what? Nobody knew. Arrived in August, first of the month. Strangulations commenced in October, Halloween night, an inch of frost on the ground. Poor Mrs. Wallisak. Alone in her house, kids out trick-or-treating, husband at the Legion testing his kidneys. Somebody'd played her a trick, all right. Tricked her face into turning blue. Tricked her heart into stopping. Left her bent over her candy bowls with her scream buried in the wrappers that all said *Boo!*

Everyone had an alibi. It was only natural to know what you'd been doing the night of the town's first murder in fifty years. All people talked about for a week was where they'd been at the fatal moment. "If I'd only stopped in for that coffee." "If I'd only stayed and chatted a minute longer."

But had Mr. Brown given out particulars of his whereabouts

that night? He had not.

Mr. Just-call-me-gentleman Brown hadn't said one word about it. None Mrs. Kenessy could recall. He'd listened in on the gosh-and-babble at the coffee counter in Chapman's grocery, at the magazine stand back of the Rexall store, at the bus depot, and hadn't said blessed-father about it.

Only smiled.

Like a cat that knew why the goldfish was gone.

In fact, now she thought of it, Gentleman Brown hadn't given his whereabouts at the times of the other deaths, either. Not a word. Just kind of sloped around the town, listening in on the chitchat and smirking.

Mrs. Kenessy stared sightlessly out through her sheers.

She felt suddenly very pleased with herself. Why hadn't she thought of this before?

Smiling, she reached for her phone. . . .

“Try to remember,” Kelly prompted. “You got to remember. Didn't you see or hear nothing just before you spotted the body? Nothing at all?”

Jeff shrugged. Running home that night, he'd been too worried about the Strangler to notice anything not loping after him, dragging its knuckles along the ground. Too busy wonder-

ing how those hands would feel on his throat—smooth? cold?

He knew what it was to suffocate. Or, at least, to almost suffocate. That brush with death occurred one hot day in the schoolyard, with his face buried in Grunt Johnson's vast armpit. Grunt was big for his age, with armpits like deep, damp gym bags. He was demonstrating a commando hold. It was hard to breathe from the first, there in Grunt's underarm, and when Grunt tightened up, showing how to snap a spinal cord (like *this!*—lifting Jeff's feet off the ground), how to block a carotid artery (like *this!*—grinding Jeff's face deep), Jeff knew he was going to die. His lungs heaved painfully. Christmas lit up behind his eyes. He had flashbacks; and the fantastic delusion that he was walled up in the glass display case of the Easy-Pay butcher shop under a mound of salt pork. He'd blacked right out after Grunt let him go.

"You must remember something," Kelly insisted. "Maybe we could hypnotize you. People remember all kinds of things when they're hypnotized."

"I don't want to be hypnotized."

"Well then?"

Jeff thought hard.

"I *do* remember something," he said. "A car. I remember a car."

Kelly sat up. "What kind of car? Describe it."

"I can't describe it. A sedan, maybe. Or a station wagon. I didn't pay much attention. I just remember—a car."

Kelly snorted. "Some reporter. A train blows up in front of you, and you say, 'Yeah, but was it a bus?'" Come on, Jeff, THIMK!" He pounded the sign beside his computer.

"I remember the license plate," Jeff said.

It wasn't so odd recalling the plate number and not the car. He'd formed the habit last winter when Kelly got his computer for Christmas. They'd spent months creating data bases. Names and addresses. Birthdays. Phone numbers. Jeff had finally suggested license plates, and they'd prowled the town with notebooks, scrawling down numbers and the names of the people who drove the cars. Kelly boasted that their file on WestBrook was as good as that of the Motor Vehicle Branch.

Kelly pressed a pen into Jeff's hand. Jeff put his tongue in his cheek and jotted: 2... A... 2... Y... K—then he stopped.

"Well?" Kelly prompted.

"I don't know. The first part's right. But the last bit—"

"THIMK, Jeff, THIMK!"

"I am *thinking*!"

"Well, *think* harder, then."

They sat in Kelly's upstairs bedroom, breathing.

"No," Jeff said finally, feeling as though he were letting down all the journalists of the world. "Sorry. It just won't come."

But Kelly was turning to his computer, calling up his dBase program, doing a search. The fields scrolled by. Kelly zeroed in. Then he sat back in his chair. "Check this out. We got two entries with those first five characters. Sam Carlin, 2A2 YKO. And Mr. Brown, that new guy, 2A2 YKW. Damn!"

He turned on Jeff. "You just got to remember that last letter!"

"Hope Morrisette? Listen. I been thinking about what you said. About the girls hoping I'd know who this Strangler is. Well, I didn't want to say it right off—you know I hate to start rumors—but, fact is, I've had suspicions for a time."

For at least five minutes anyway, Annie Kenessy thought.

Hope was thrilled. "Tell me, Annie. You can trust me. I don't spread rumors. You know me."

"Yes," said Annie, "I know you." She sighed. "Here it is, then. But keep your lip on hold. Tell the girls I gave you a name but that I swore you to secrecy. I am swearing you to secrecy. Okay?"

"You can trust me, Annie. Who is it?"

Annie Kenessy let a dramatic silence go slithering down the line. Then she said, "I figure possibly, just maybe . . . our very own gentleman, Mr. Brown."

Hope Morrisette gasped.

"It fits," Mrs. Kenessy said, "if you stop a minute, and glom your brain onto it and think about it."

"I am thinking about it," Hope said. "I am!"

He went out again in the late afternoon, just as soon as the sun began to droop behind the trees, and got into his car and slowly drifted up and down the pathways of the jungle town, noticing the game that was afoot along the concrete trails, mostly near watering holes like the Rexall Drugs, footing it skittishly this way and that, scared eyes in every direction.

And he laughed softly, slipped cloves under his lip, and played his tape.

“What would you do if you met the Strangler?” Kelly asked.

“What would I do? I'd run.”

“You wouldn't try to stop him? Catch him?”

Jeff laughed. “You nuts? Stop him with what? My neck? Would I say, ‘Here, Strangler, hold this till the police arrive?’ Not likely. I'd move like a cat going

over a bush. And so would you."

"Mom says some folks feel sorry for him. They say that he's sick and ought to be taken care of."

"He ought to be taken care of, all right."

They stood in the street at the edge of the curb, and the sun beat down on them and the hot air baked them and the heat boiled up at them in dust bowl waves off the concrete.

"You sure it was parked here?" Kelly asked. He studied the dirt in the crook of the gutter. "No treadmarks."

Jeff felt sweat roll down under his collar. He didn't like standing out in the open near the scene of the Strangler's latest crime. He eyed the housefronts warily. What if the Strangler lived here? What if, even now, he was watching from behind a secret curtain?

Kelly scuffed a pebble with his foot. "If we had a treadmark, we could compare it with the tires on the Brown and Carlin vehicles." He spoke like a practiced detective.

Jeff was anxious to leave. "What about a Coke?"

To his relief, Kelly nodded. Together they walked along the curb, heading for the Flint Street Sals. Near the end of the block, Kelly suddenly gripped Jeff's arm. He nodded at a house.

"This where Preefer the Beef-er lives?"

"Uh-huh. So what?"

"Still hosing down the neighbor kids. Look."

Kelly pointed. The dirt in the gutter was darker here, as if it had been wetted down well the previous day. And there was a very crisp, very clear treadmark in it.

Kelly whipped out paper and pencil and started sketching.

"But we're half a block from where I saw the car," Jeff protested. "Any car could have left this mark."

Kelly said, "Tonight we check a few tires."

She didn't like to think about murder.

Mrs. Fox-White stood before her cherished collection of figurines, soup bowls, and plates, and saw them not at all. She didn't even notice her Staffordshire loving cup. She was too upset for that. So upset that the blood was pounding in the veins of her wrists and temples like war drums.

She had just got a call. From her friend Phyllis Drieger.

The town was buzzing over the murder of Wild Luba Moony, God love her, and Phyl had said that Carol had said that Hope Morrisette had said that all of WestBrook now knew who the Strangler was, that they ought to have guessed it before, that there was positively no doubt about it any more, that the

Strangler was . . .

. . . Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown, if you could feature it.

Mr. Not-hurt-a-fly Ban-the-Bomb Goodman Brown.

Well, Mrs. Fox-White could guess from whom that insidious slander had sprung. Who else but Hope Morrisette's best friend!

Who else but Annie Kenessy?

It was time Mrs. Fox-White did some calling of her own. She hefted the phone like a weapon and dialed.

Annie Kenessy couldn't begin to imagine how she had gotten blamed for such a thing. After all, who knew? Only that Hope Morrisette! She stood and looked out into Ryerson Street and flayed Hope Morrisette from curb to curb.

Mrs. Fox-White's voice had crackled with outrage over the phone. Outrage and indignation. Snapping on the line like a whip. She was a heller, that Mrs. Fox-White, when her boilers were fired. Said she was sending Mr. Brown off to his lawyers first thing tomorrow, and Mrs. Kenessy's knees went so squishy she'd almost collapsed on the spot. There was no way out of it. She had to obey Mrs. Fox-White; had to go to the man this very evening and apologize, and promise not to

breathe a word to anyone about him again, and beg him flat out not to see his lawyers, and make him see how sorry she was, real sorry, just as sorry as she could be, and convince him that this would not be repeated again, not ever, not once.

It might not be so bad. He just might actually *be* a gentleman, mightn't he?

Well, mightn't he?

Damn that Hope Morrisette! And damn that Mrs. Fox-White, too!

She went to get her walking shoes with a trail of sparks behind her.

Kelly insisted they inspect tires after dark. Jeff was against it. After dark, he said, was the very *worst* time to be flat on the ground under a murderer's car.

Kelly would hear no arguments.

Armed with sketch and flashlight, they quickly eliminated the Carlin vehicle. Since it was parked under a lamp in a lane, they didn't need the flashlight to see that the sawtooth pattern of its tires was nothing like the snakelike wriggles in the sketch.

And so they proceeded on to Mr. Brown's.

"This one won't be so easy," Kelly said.

They were hunkered down in the wild grass in a field behind Brown's overgrown lot. They could barely see Brown's car

drawn up deep in shadows and weeds—only the flank of its rear quarter panel and the top of its trunk.

"I don't like this," Jeff said. "Those bushes. That shadow. No way to see who's sneaking up. Scary."

"Hey. We're investigative reporters. With a job to do."

"Somebody might do a job on us."

"There's a bit of a risk."

"Only a bit? And even if the tiremarks match, we still haven't proved anything. So this car was parked on the street that night. It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Stop whining. Let's get at it."

Kelly scuttled across the wash of light and into the shadows of Mr. Brown's yard. Jeff followed. He had to. It was unwise to lie alone in a dark field with the Strangler loping about.

To get a close, clear look at the tire treads, they had to slide under the car completely, and they did that. The flashlight beam leaped from the sketch to the tire tread and back again. Both boys whistled.

"A match," Jeff said.

They squirmed out from under.

"Do we tell the police?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"It isn't enough. You said so yourself. We need more proof.

Something solid."

As he spoke Kelly was already poking into a green plastic garbage bag that was resting at the rear of the house.

Kelly made Jeff hold the light while he knelt and doled garbage out onto the ground. He eyeballed each item, scrutinizing, as if he were cataloguing a fabulous treasure. Orange peels, tin cans, soiled paper plates, bottles—he studied each one before dropping it with a frown.

"Jeez," Jeff whispered, "you mean to sort the whole mess?"

Kelly nodded.

"It stinks. You might catch something."

Kelly shook his head.

"What do you hope to find? I mean, he wouldn't toss anything incriminating out with the trash. He'd burn it, right? Or take it to some lonely place and bury it."

"Hah!" Kelly suddenly plunged an arm into the mess and came out with a damp wad of paper.

Jeff stooped. "Got something?"

But after a glance, Kelly dropped it, kept on sorting.

Jeff shook his head. "Disgusting."

Then Kelly fished out another wad. Carefully he uncrumpled the paper ball, spread it flat on his knee. An envelope.

Kelly scanned it with hooded eyes, then struck it with the back of his hand, grinning. Jeff bent to look. It bore several addresses, all but one crossed off carelessly, new ones scrawled in different hands.

"This is it!"

Kelly stood up. They turned to make for the alley, only to find their way blocked and to hear a stern voice saying, "This is what, boys?"

Annie Kenessy went timorously down the midnight street with one rubber heel of her walking shoes going *scree, scree, scree*, and thought up two dozen ways of presenting herself to Gentleman Brown. I could cry, she thought, then threw that idea away. She had only cried once in her adult life, and that was when her best friend Betty Glasner was led away between two cops for planting her louse of a husband under her next door neighbor's dahlias.

Still, she had to strike some sort of attitude.

Why not face him in a ham-dam man-to-man sort of way? Tell him she'd made a mistake; she wouldn't repeat it, she was sorry, and goodbye.

Hmmm.

A warm wind drifted in off the fields. It bent the trees at the waist and danced the black-leaved hedgerows all along the street.

"It's like the night don't want me to go."

She stopped under an elm. The wind leapt like a dervish in the boughs above her head. She chided herself.

"Brown will be off to the city first thing tomorrow to stir up his lawyers with a stick, and this is the only chance you got to talk the Grinch out of it. So go. Get."

She went.

Mrs. Fox-White held out her hand. "Give that to me."

Reluctantly, the taller boy handed her the envelope. She took it from him, glanced at it, squeezed it in her fist.

"What are you boys doing here?"

They scuffed their feet on the grass.

"We're investigating," the shorter boy said. It was Mrs. Mills' young son, the one who'd found the body of Wild Luba Moony, God love her. "We're trying to find the Strangler."

Mrs. Fox-White fixed a glare on him.

"So you're sorting through every garbage bag in the town?"

"No, ma'am, Only this one. See, we know this car was near the place where Luba Moony got killed. We found its tire tracks and everything. And that envelope—"

"What about it?"

Both boys shut up. They

glanced at one another.

"You both better scoot out of here," Mrs. Fox-White said. "Kids your age, listening to malicious gossip. Don't you know the harm that can do? I know Mr. Brown, and he's the gentlest man there is." They looked doubtful, and she blurted out, "I'm here tonight to have dinner with him. Now you boys forget all this or I'll have a long talk with your mothers. Now get!"

The boys were at the lane in one bound, and a patter of running shoes took them away.

Mrs. Fox-White raised the envelope and read it again. There were three addresses, each in different hands and inks. The original one, Mr. Green, had been stroked through with a scrawled note, "Not here, Try Smith, Fargo," and another, "Moved—Forward Mr. Jones, Brandon."

And the final, the successful address that of this house—Mr. Brown. The envelope was open. Empty. Troubled, Mrs. Fox-White thrust it into her pocket. She went up the steps, thinking, and rang the bell.

Ten more minutes brought Annie Kenessy to the Gentleman's house, and she didn't much like the look of it.

Too dark, too curtained, too far back from the street, too far in from its neighbors. Too many

trees and bushes and weeds, too much plant life growing like a barricade. "Like the brambles round the castle of the poisoned sleeping princess," she mumbled.

But there was no princess behind those prickly plants. No witch either. Only an old warlock. And he didn't deal in apples but in lawsuits.

Mrs. Fox-White was usually thrilled by these late, secret dinners. She and John had much in common. Much to talk about. Wasn't he building her a ceramics, porcelain, and glass collection? And wasn't it she who was helping him give up cigarettes, suggesting he tuck cloves under his lip? She regretted he was so distrustful of the town that he did not want them to be seen together. She'd be proud to walk out with him evenings, attend Legion bingos and summer festivals. But he had a horror of gossip. And what she had to tell him tonight might well harden his resolve even further.

They sat on the loveseat.

He had a new piece for her, and it was beautiful: a Volkstedt female-figurine-recumbent-among-lilies, hairline-crack, one-elbow-chipped. She thanked him even as the tears welled up inside her for what she had to say. She rewrapped

the lovely piece in its tissue paper and put it carefully into her purse.

She didn't know how to begin. She let John do the talking; as usual, he had something to say on the subject of worldwide peace.

"There is no place, Mrs. Fox-White, in a peaceful world, for that engine of violence, the ICBM."

Any other time Mrs. Fox-White would have been only too pleased to confirm it. She knew all about ICBM's; they flew up, and then down. This evening she sat in glum silence.

"And let us not forget the Minuteman, I, II, and even III, Mrs. Fox-White, surely, the sceptres of Satan."

"Awful," Mrs. Fox-White agreed, "but—"

"And the MX. What violent hand has set that abomination among us!"

"Abomination," said Mrs. Fox-White, "listen—"

"The machineries of doom, Mrs. Fox-White. How can we stand against them? We must launch a missile of our own. We must launch a lawsuit—"

"Lawsuit. That's it!" Mrs. Fox-White was suddenly on her feet. "It's what I told her. You'd file a lawsuit against her!"

John sat owl-eyed, blinking.

Slowly, she sank back down into the loveseat.

"John, you've got to take this

calmly. Somebody," she said as gently as she could, "has been spreading an awful rumor about you—and I know who that somebody is. A somebody who's been phoning folks and telling them that—that you're the Strangler."

John opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. He turned his head slightly and examined a spot on the wall. His hands lay abandoned in his lap, fingers gently curved.

"I phoned her up and I told her off. And I demanded she march herself right down here tonight and apologize to you."

Now John looked even more devastated, smitten. His gently curved fingers had started to tremble. His words came in a sort of rattling whisper.

"You invited somebody *here? Tonight?*" He shook his head and kept on shaking it as if there were something loose inside it that only he could hear.

And then they were interrupted by a knocking at the door.

It was not nearly the humiliation Annie Kenessy had expected. She sat on the lumpy sectional, hands folded in her lap like a school-girl, keeping her mouth shut.

Mr. Brown could have really waded into her. He had cause. He could have rampaged up one side of her with climbing boots

on, and down the other side all steel toes and heels. He could have torn one strip after another off her, nailed them back on with spikes, yanked them off again. He could have preached, pranced, paced, shaken long fingers admonishingly, cast aspersions. Given her the death of a thousand cuts.

But it didn't happen.

Instead, the man seemed almost reluctant to say a harsh word to her.

There'd have been nothing to it but for that damned, saintly Mrs. Fox-White there on the loveseat, fierce as a bishop. *She* looked ready to drag the tar and feathers out, for all her talk of understanding. Annie had been astonished to find Mrs. Fox-White here, and the dining room table set for two. But maybe she ought to have expected it. Who but Weeping Winnie would do for Gentleman Brown? They were well suited. A pope and a parson.

She was dismissed.

With a glance at Mrs. Fox-White like the swipe of a razor, she was out the door, free.

With the door still shaking from Annie Kenessy's exit, John turned his cool glare on Mrs. Fox-White.

"Get out," he said to her in a whisper.

Mrs. Fox-White blinked at him, uncomprehending. His

hostility was like ice water, flung in her face.

"John, please try to understand. I was only trying to help. She was saying these things about you. I had to put a stop to it fast. That's why I brought her here. Believe me, it's for the best. You don't know small towns—"

"Don't I?" His voice was a dull rasp. He was staring at her with—was it possible?—hatred.

Then she remembered the envelope. "I'm sorry," she stammered, seeking reconciliation, "I guess you do know what small towns are like." She pulled the envelope from the pocket of her sweater and held it out to him. "All these other places . . ."

He stared at the wrinkled white paper in her hand with astonishment, then suddenly, with predatory swiftness, made a grab for it.

She let it fall. She didn't want it. She wanted out. This wasn't her Mr. Brown. This was somebody else. A stranger. As he stooped to scoop it up, she rushed out into the night, sobbing.

Meanwhile, Annie Kenessy was also hurrying home.

The wind had come up stronger while she was making her apologies at Mr. Brown's house. At the edge of the prairie a black ridge of pines and poplars marched against the sky and shut in the town. It seemed

darker. All blacks and greys. No one about.

And suddenly she was afraid.

In her rush to save herself from the lawyers, she had forgotten about the Strangler.

"If it isn't Mr. Brown," she muttered, "then who the heck is it?"

Her neck seemed suddenly a frail and vulnerable thing, a thing to be kept safe and protected, and she burrowed her head deeper into her collar. Her heels beat like a heart against the pavement. The one shoe went *scree, scree, scree*.

"Home soon," she told herself, "nothing to it, easy."

She could see all along the deserted, dancing street.

"Safe as houses," she said.

It was like hurrying through a city of the dead. The night was electric with bodiless voices. A babble of long-forgotten gossip in the telephone wires, stories of young women, dark alleys—murder. A train shunted in the north yards, a lonely sound of freight cars coming together, thumping. Mr. Borden's spaniel barked. There. That was life for you, wasn't it?

A car gentled by on rubber wheels, windows down. She glimpsed an arm, a hand with fingers slightly curved, resting on the back of the seat where the passenger's neck might be. She heard dulcet music, a familiar melody. About an

evening . . . a stranger . . . a meeting.

And immediately her mind flew back twenty years. To the summer her church group had put on *South Pacific* as a benefit, Doe Bartlett misplacing the music, Jim Jeffries forgetting his lines. Joe Rawlings flipping his car over, drunk as a magistrate.

Her shoes tick-tocked on the pavement like time running out. She had come to the path through the vacant lot. In a movie you'd holler, "No, don't go in there! Are you crazy? Stop!" But she'd cut through this field a thousand times. She turned into it; she could see the roof of her house.

What was that? Something behind her? A car door clicking shut? She stopped, turned, looked. No, nothing. Only the street. And the curtain of night.

"Silly!"

But her heart went galloping, galloping, galloping like a horseman under her ribs.

"Foolish!"

And it was. This was her town. Hadn't she lived here all of her life? Run here as a girl? Learned every crook and cranny? Just let that Strangler show himself if it was violence he wanted. She'd practice every punishment on him she'd preached. Show him a hulla-baruckus he'd never forget. Give him a darn good . . .

She froze. She heard the melody again. This time a gentle humming. Behind her. She turned numb as a post. I can't move, she thought, fascinated. And what was that spicy smell? She was about to let out a scream meant to break every window on Main Street when two soft hands came gently to seize her by the neck.

He stood in the dark, empty house with his arms loose at his sides, fingers gently curved, short, black hairs on the backs of his hands alert to the tiniest pressures of the air, prickling. I'm a lion, he thought—no, a leopard. A black leopard lurking in the forest of a house with all its midnight voices speaking. The *dab-dab-dab* of a faucet, shedding drops like dew from a broad, green leaf. The soft savannah wind sigh of the fridge. The nocturnal creature cries of creaking pipes and timbers. Night in the jungle. Where death is sudden.

Nothing moved.

He took a stealthy step. A board groaned.

Outside this room, all around, lay the even deeper, even darker jungle of the town. Unlit alleys, murky back lots, danger. People flitting quickly under the hooded sky, from shadow to light, from light to shadow, wary, finding their shelter early.

A jungle that was nearly hunted out.

Time to move on.

But first . . .

He felt as strong as a jungle animal. A jungle cat.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty," he whispered.

The faucet dripped. Outside he heard brisk footsteps tapping up the walk. He thrust a clove stalk under his lip.

"Look!" Kelly hissed excitedly. "Just look!"

He had dialed out on the modem to the city library database, accessible twenty-four hours, and was doing a news item search. His expert fingers had keyboarded through reports, brought them in amber flashes to the screen, highlighted them. There, in that town, the screen said, there had been five unsolved stranglings; and in another, there had been four.

"Smith, Jones, Brown — coincidence?" Kelly Jay asked. "All the towns written on that envelope!"

She was sure she'd heard the cellar door click.

Mrs. Fox-White, opposed to violence, stood ramrod straight against the dining room doorway, like a part of it, stiff as oak trim and nails and plastered wall. The light switch in

this room didn't work either, and now she knew that she wasn't alone. Not alone. No.

"Some Enchanted Evening"

"Who's here?" she whispered. "Who's here in my beautiful house?"

The voice sang on. A husky voice, a whisper. It missed out words and filled in the blanks with hums. Familiar. Then she saw a movement. The body with the throat with the voice that hummed the tune came shambling slowly out of the corner.

Mrs. Fox-White's breath snagged in her throat. She shrank away. A terrible sense of betrayal flashed through her. I was stupid, she thought. Stupid, stupid, stupid so very stupid, *stupid!* All those letters, that friendship.

Stupid!

The shadow loomed closer.

Humming. Humming.

Then the hands. She was expecting them, watching for them. They didn't disappoint her. They came floating up out of the dark at her, spread like great white moths, reaching. I can't breathe, she thought; and she couldn't. I'm getting colder. A chill shook her. My heart's going to stop.

It did stop.

The hands touched her.

They were not, as she expected, cold as death, nor even cold as the plaster behind her.

They were hot hands. Purposeful hands. As the fingertips taloned in on her, the heat came off them in waves, feverish and alive. And now she could smell her visitor's breath. It smelt of cloves.

Cloves.

And at that instant somewhere deep down inside her a fuse was suddenly lit, an exceedingly short fuse that ran gaily, gaily sparking to the dynamite in her soul.

Mrs. Fox-White blew up.

"Ahhh!" she yelled, and brought one hand around hard to deal a good stiff palm-smack to the side of the shadowy head. *Crack!* The hands flew back from her neck like startled vultures at a feeding. And even while the shadow-shape was still recoiling from her first swat, she brought her other hand up just as smartly and planted a second cuff on it going the other way.

Smack!

"You, you . . ."

She kept on hitting. She waded in. A pair of glasses flew and smashed, fragments rattling off the kitchen stove. Her assailant staggered back, gasping, reeling, a shadow among shadows, flitting.

Mrs. Fox-White thought, I'm being violent, by God.

It felt good.

She strode after the dodging shadow, smacking, kicking,

dealing out blows like an Amazon.

The shadow-lump scuttled, whimpering. She shot out a hand that needed no light to guide it to the spot where the floor lamp had stood for twenty years, overbalanced the top-heavy thing, brought its massive cut glass fixture plummeting down hard on that insidious lump of night. The lump howled, fell, retreated, scissored itself into the no-way-out trap behind the el of the two french doors.

Her other hand brushed the cabinet.

She hesitated for the briefest of moments, swallowed, then flung the cabinet door wide and drew its ammunition out.

A Dresden soup bowl, eighteenth century, rare, rushed through the air, bang on target. The lump shrieked. "That's for poor Mrs. Wallisak!" she hollered. The bowl was followed by each of its seven siblings, one after another, flying. "And Mrs. Steinhammer!" Her Cozzi-Venice maiden-comforting-lion coaxed a howl from the darkness, exploding. "And Betty Roslin!" Her Meissen yellow tiger joined it. An elephant, a candle holder, a teapot, and a punch bowl flew like rockets, fell like bombs. "And for Wild Luba Moony, God love her!" *Crash!* She worked her way up the shelves. At last the cabinet was empty, her hand cradling

her treasured Staffordshire loving cup (pewter-mount, gilt-border, rare).

"Ballistic missile," she yelled, "for me!" And launched it.

It struck with a concussive *crump!*

There were no more howls. The shadow lay still

"So!" said Mrs. Fox-White. She dusted her hands. "Well!"

She clumped surefootedly down the stairs to the basement, reset the breaker and brought the lights back on, then tramped back up to the dining room again.

She gazed upon the battle zone. A calamity of porcelain. A ruination of ceramics. And there sprawled among the ten thousand chips and splinters, jutting from behind a french door, were a pair of thin, trousered legs. She crunched forward over the fragments of her life for a closer look.

"Gentleman!" she said. Then she cried.

There was a thundering of footsteps on the porch. The front door flew open and three worried faces leaned in—Jeff Mills, Kelly Walker, and Constable Bill Wheeler. They stared around wonderingly. Constable Wheeler came forward, heavy boots grinding on seashell flooring, aiming his useless flashlight at the prostrate Mr. Brown like a scientist expecting radiation.

Mrs. Fox-White made little plucking motions at the air, as if seeking just the proper thing to say.

"He was trying to quit smoking," she told them. And then broke into tears again.

She didn't like to think about murder.

But the newspapers and the talk in the town were crazy with it, and the radio went *yak-yak-yak* about it, and the phone rang and the doorbell jangled and everybody under the sun seemed to want to do nothing else but blather about it; and so Mrs. Fox-White unplugged the phone, put the chain on her door, closed the curtains, and went around the house with her Walkman clamped over her ears, playing *Zamfir* at volume nine to keep the commotion and the hubbub shut out.

At ten o'clock the men from the Salvation Army finally came, waving the shadows of their arms against the curtained glass to get her atten-

tion, and she let them in quickly and watched them wrestle the now empty, glass-doored, polished mahogany display cabinet down the front steps into the street.

Empty, since she hadn't bothered to put her one surviving collectible into it, the new item she had almost completely forgotten about, the item that had nearly stretched her purse out of shape, the very last item she had ever gotten.

It sat there staring at her.

She stared back. And at that moment saw it for what it really was. Suddenly, she grabbed up and hurled the Volkstedt female-figurine-recumbent-among-lilies, hairline-crack, one-elbow-chipped out the door to shatter like a glass grenade on the sidewalk.

"There!" she said to the two startled truckers. "Well! Mrs. Kenessy was right. Satisfaction—that's the thing."

And then she dusted her hands.

And then gently, ever so gently, she shut the door.

UNSOLVED

by
Ken Weber

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

"The Rail Starter Did Not Win. Repeat. The number one dog did not win. Nor did number two. Repeat. Nor did the number two."

Laurie Silverberg took his eyes off the receiver for just a moment to be sure the tape recorder was working. There were two people taking notes as well, but experience had made him pessimistic.

"Number three hound finished behind the number two, but not in order. Repeat. The number three. . . ."

Laurie leaned back in his chair and allowed himself to relax. Everything was in working order. Reception was clear. It should be—the satellite was almost directly overhead. The radio was working, the tape recorder was working, and the notes, he knew, would be accurate.

"Should be a breeze this time," he said to no one in particular, but almost loud enough to distract his wife's attention from the next burst of transmission.

"The five dog ran . . . ng r . . ."

The garbled sounds brought Laurie to his feet immediately. On repeat, the sound was no better.

"... dog . . . strong . . ."

"Not again!" Laurie grabbed the dial to change frequencies.

"Wait!" His wife Sue put her hand quickly but gently over his. She was one of the note takers and as familiar with the reception problems at Neewakik Station as anyone. "It's a blip, I'm sure of it."

The next two seconds were long ones, but it turned out she was right. The interruption was only temporary. When the next sentence came booming from the receiver, it did so with total clarity.

"The Results of the Eighth Race," reprinted from 5 Minute Mysteries for the Armchair Detective by Ken Weber, copyright © 1988 by Ken Weber. Reprinted by permission of Running Press Book Publishers, Philadelphia.

"The four dog was not last and did not finish just before or after the one. Repeat. . . ."

Laurie's look of chagrin and gratitude moved from Sue to Rick Parker, but neither of them noticed. It was Rick's radio in the Department of Northern Affairs office that they were using. He and Sue had their attention fully turned to it.

"The number two dog closed in the stretch but did not finish next to the number four."

By the time the repeat concluded, Laurie had relaxed again. The rest of the results for the eighth race were obviously going to come in smoothly. He walked over to the coffee maker in the corner to put some distance between himself and the action. Although he was the mastermind of the network, the things he needed to make it work—the radio, the satellite, the postal system—these were the traitors. Somehow he always felt they worked better the farther he kept himself from them.

The "network" was a product of Laurie's inventive mind, and a bit of serendipity. The result was legal—or at least not necessarily illegal—off-track betting.

Because of the radio communication these high-flying Anik satellites made possible, the little weather stations and church missions and oil exploration camps of the far north had become a kind of single community in which none of the inhabitants had ever met face to face. Except Laurie. He was a doctor and health officer for an area about the size of France and Germany combined. He traveled throughout the area by plane, boat, and snowmobile, and in his spare time monitored the network.

It worked simply. From the south—anything below the sixtieth parallel was "the south"—every Sunday between 0700 and 1000 GMT, a former patient of Laurie's who was a racetrack fan and an air traffic controller—in that order—broadcast the results of the second, fifth, and eighth races run the previous day at the dog track near his Florida apartment. As well, he gave the entries for the next week.

With the aid of Rick Parker's radio—not to mention his considerable math and computer skills—the participants in Laurie's network generated their own odds and their own betting pool. Within an hour after the results came in, the bettors would hear their results in turn, in a general transmission from Neewakik Station. Winners got their money in the mail.

What kept the authorities at bay was Laurie's rigorous insistence that any profits in the pool go to health care, and the unique method

of transmitting the results from Florida. To broadcast, in the clear, which dogs came first, second, or third would have been of questionable legality. Hence the enigmatic messages that were now so fully occupying everyone's attention at Neewakik Station.

A sputter from the coffee maker startled Laurie for a second, but did not distract him from the final transmission, which was:

"The rail starter did not finish last."

In the brief silence that took over, everyone stretched. Sue Silverberg gathered her notes and began to stick each one onto the bulletin board above her.

"We got it all," she said, "except for the blip in the eighth race."

Laurie peered at the notes. "Do you think we can raise Florida for a repeat?" he asked Rick Parker.

"Not necessary, I'd say," Sue put in before Rick could answer. "I think we've got enough."

Sue believes she can determine the results of the eighth race, despite the missing piece. Is this overconfidence or is it possible?

See page 138 for the solution to the July puzzle.

FICTION

Cargo



by Dan
Crawford

Illustration by Patricia Olstad

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Polijn coughed and waved a hand just under her nose. And this was supposed to be spring! How dusty did Silmariën get in summer?

She knew this region was warm and dry; that's why she had come south. But winter wasn't right without sleet and slush. People were scant here, too, and spread out. A minstrel had to walk miles in the heat to get a decent audience. When you did have an audience, sometimes you couldn't tell whether they were cheering or booing, in their long, slow dialect.

Polijn's own accent marked her as a foreigner. She would not have been welcome if she hadn't been a minstrel. But the western Silmarians were superstitious to the bone, not like the hypercivilized people farther east, along the coast. No one expected her to talk like a mere human being. Polijn was accorded the awe they reserved for supernatural beings: dragons, wizards, or kings. They might have expressed this awe with gold, if they'd had any.

But they didn't, so, awe or no, Polijn had set her nose northeast where audiences were tougher but wealthier and the weather, though hostile, never tried to strangle her. What was kicking up all this dust, anyhow?

Her brains must have been

sunburnt; she thumped herself on the head. Of course, a cloud like this could only be raised by a large group: an army, a herd, a trader with a string of wagons, some massed company moving along a dry road. And where there was a collection of people, herding or marching to war, there was an audience and perhaps profit. Pulling her scarf over her mouth, Polijn plunged ahead into the choking cloud.

It was ox carts churning up the road, for all they moved slowly enough. Polijn made out at least two dozen, accompanied by men and women in drab, dusty work clothes. They saw her appear out of the dust, the flute that swung on a cord from her belt clearly marking her profession. They called and whistled.

Polijn waved, but kept moving. It would be improper to stop and make conversation before she met the caravan leader. These officials carefully guarded the security of their expeditions, and might be unwilling to let a stranger come along for the ride.

The nearer Polijn came to the head of the column, the slower the procession moved. "Yah might as well stop an' gi'e us a story, friend minstrel," drawled a tall carter. "They're gane ta be at it a while."

At least the dust was lower here. At the front of the parade

she saw a big square box on wheels, painted bright blue and yellow, like the horns and yokes of the oxen pulling it. This had come to a complete stop at a crossroads. Three men stood next to it, shaking fingers at each other.

Two of the men were tall and thickly muscled, with sharp features and similarly cleft chins that marked them as relatives. They were talking something over, at the top of their lungs, with the huge man leaning against the blue and yellow wagon. He nodded and smiled; he was built for leisure. Thick chunks of gray hair on either side of a weatherbeaten pate put him at least in his late fifties, and his massive stomach marked him as a man who has had some success in his half-century. His eyelids drooped as he looked from one man to the other. Their tirade had left him unmoved. Polijn guessed he'd be hard to move if he didn't want to move.

From the way those fingers kept pointing, Polijn judged the argument to be over which fork of the road to take. The two younger men were urging the northern route as more direct. Polijn slowed down. She didn't want to interrupt.

The bulky man did it for her. "You!" he called, his eyes snapping open. "You aren't a member of this caravan!"

The other two men turned to look. "Oh, Uncle," said the shorter of them, who was balding a bit. "How can you possibly know that? There are so many people along you can't possibly know them all by sight."

"A caravan master's job," said the heavy man, inclining his head forward, "is to know people by sight. Speak up! Who are you and what do you want?"

Polijn bowed. "I am a minstrel, honored sir. Polijn is my name." She swung her flute up where he could see it and balanced it on one finger for a moment. "I can sing, talk, juggle, read cards, and tumble a bit, though it's hot weather for that. All my skills are not named in so short a list, but perhaps an important gentleman has no time to hear the rest. Have you a place for me in your train?"

The three men looked her up, and then down. Polijn wished she had thought to slap some of the dust from her clothes before coming this far.

"There isn't . . ." one of them began.

The older man pushed past his nephews and spread a hand on his chest. "I am Peliapf of Sack's Bottom," he announced. "These are my nephews, Kes-san and Gonfrid. We are not opposed to music, you understand, but tell me this: do those other skills of yours include addition and subtraction?"

"I know my numbers," said Polijn with a nod.

"Then if you'd rather ride than walk," Peliapf said, "we can use a secretary."

"What?" demanded the taller nephew.

"Balquet, who usually serves to keep our records, fell ill on the eve of our return north," said the merchant. "How well do you know money?"

Both of his nephews objected at once. "We can handle that ourselves, Uncle," said the taller man.

"Among your regular chores, I suppose," Peliapf replied, not at all ruffled. "You boys never shirk, no, but there's just too much for the three of us."

"You don't even know him," objected the other nephew.

Now Peliapf frowned. "Her," he corrected.

One of the nephews frowned, too, and demanded, "Now, how can you tell that?" But the other simply ignored this and went on, "Anyway, you don't know her."

Peliapf nodded, his brow smooth again. "That helps," he said. "I can't think of any reason not to trust her."

Kessan and Gonfrid exchanged glances of despair. Peliapf moved close enough to drop a hand on Polijn's shoulder. "And I like her looks. Now tell me, Polijn, what you know about the coinage of Silmariën."

And, Kessan, get the oxen moving again."

The nephews expostulated, but Peliapf guided Polijn to the stairs at the back of the wagon and urged her up inside, to a compact bedroom/office. Polijn had her suspicions, but went on reeling off the names and values of coins until the merchant shoved a thick writing board into her hand.

"Read that," he ordered.

Polijn read what she saw in the wax on the board, stumbling over the names that were unfamiliar. The whole list was just names and numbers, but that was all the reading ability Peliapf needed. "Not bad," said the merchant, "allowing for an outlandish accent."

The wagon lurched, but Peliapf didn't seem to notice and came to her side. "Now, Donilus here," he said, pointing to a name on the list, "is a dice-maker. He's the last one we tell if there's a single sign of bandits on the road; terrified someone will steal his precious cargo. His cousin's Ninachak, the baker; Ninachak will run to Donilus with anything you tell him. Ninachak's brought his wife along. She's been sleeping in the fletcher's cart, for reasons that probably seem adequate to her, but we don't want Ninachak to know, or her to know that we know. We..."

"Uncle," objected the taller

nephew, standing on the stairs. "Those are secrets."

"Certainly," said Peliapf as the wagon lurched again. "That's what secretaries are for. So there you are. And a minstrel knows how to keep quiet as well as how to sing. This one's kept quiet before. I can tell from the way those lips snap together."

The merchant led the way to the door of the wagon. Polijn followed unsteadily. The nephew hopped down to make room for them to descend, but asked as they passed, "Could we talk about this, Uncle? Or at least think about it?"

"Certainly," Peliapf replied, waving to him. "I will be free this evening, after supper. Come this way, Polijn. I can introduce you as the wagons pass."

The bargain was apparently struck. Polijn was to have her ride north, and Peliapf was to have his secretary. After a day or so Kessan and Gonfrid stopped grouching about it.

Not that the business was without its difficulties. The journey involved precious little riding for Polijn, as it turned out. The secretary of the caravan was in charge of, among other things, barter between members of the train of merchants and craftsmen. No unreasonable amount of cheating could be allowed when they swapped goods or feuds might

break out, slowing the caravan's progress and lowering profits. Peliapf could be appealed to if a case became too tangled, but Polijn had to know weights and measures (honest and otherwise), four or five different coinages, market values, and sometimes complex arithmetic. Fortunately, she had spent her childhood in a very gritty neighborhood in which such knowledge was the fabric of life. The work was tedious, and strenuous when it involved walking from one wagon to another and back while the procession was in motion, but she was good at it.

Mintrelsy stood her in good stead on the job. A story could jolly a person into agreement, or at least remind him that she was a minstrel and, hence, a being of superior wisdom and judgment. Of course, it often led to demands for songs and stories in the evening when everyone else could rest and eat while the food was hot.

Polijn's repertoire was wide, with something for everyone. She quickly learned who liked to hear adventure and who romance. The boys (the nephews were always "the boys" to her, despite her being half their age) liked dragons slain and hoards plundered. She hoped it was the dragons, less than the hoards, that won them. Kessan, at least, always glowed during

the combat passages.

Peliapf was more inclined to lyrical descriptions of scenery. He was willing to correct Polijn if she sang about some place he'd passed through. He never interrupted too obviously, so Polijn was grateful for the chance to hone her songs. And it seemed Peliapf had been nearly everywhere.

He was certainly respected by the mixed batch of entrepreneurs in his train. Not only was he a canny caravan master with minimal losses to bandits in the course of a generation, but there was something mystical about him. Polijn sensed it her first day, not so much in anything about Peliapf but in the way Skindic, the argumentative armorer, fell silent and watched the corpulent leader in awe when he passed. And no one but his nephews ever presumed to argue with him.

Back home the only way to call up this kind of respect was to have a quick knife and absolutely no discrimination in the use of it. Peliapf didn't look the type.

Polijn had too much to do to devote much time to investigation, but on the third day out, when the wagons were bogged down and Gonfrid was berating his uncle for having chosen this rutted road, she remarked to Pasqua, "They've little enough respect for old Peliapf, it seems."

"Ah," said the woodcarver's wife. "But then they'd have no fear, being of the same family. The curse is nothing to them."

"Curse?" said Polijn.

"The wizard's curse," the woman whispered, making one of the Silmarian signs to ward off evil. "You know."

Polijn did not know, but hated to blemish her reputation as a superior being. There were other merchants in the train with looser tongues. Now that she had a clue, she could drop the right hints to get the whole story.

But as it turned out, none of these merchants had traveled with Peliapf before, and they had only the vaguest understanding of the caravan leader's history. A wizard had cursed him at birth; they didn't know what wizard, or why, but that was enough. No wizard had ever so much as taken notice of them or their families. The mere fact of Peliapf's having been close enough to a legendary figure of power to draw a curse was enough to make him a person of otherworldly consequence.

Polijn was not troubled. If there was a good story here, she'd dig it out at last. Peliapf was not averse to talking, and certainly not to talking about himself.

And he liked Polijn. He worried about her. "Thin, child,"

he'd tell her, poking one pudgy finger in the general direction of her ribs without ever actually making contact. "Much too thin."

"But Polijn rhymes with 'so thin,'" she reminded him. "It's only natural."

"And Peliapf rhymes with 'too fat by half?'" the merchant inquired.

Inevitably, there were rumors along the train about the exact relationship between Peliapf and his secretary, but they were not bothersome. Everyone simply assumed that two people with such connections to power belonged together. And the juiciest rumors had not an ounce of truth to them. Peliapf treated Polijn more like a protégé, giving her much advice which she didn't need, but took as a sign that he regarded her as a colleague.

"Deceit when buyer and seller come together, child," he said, "is as inevitable as the seam when two bricks are set next to each other."

The only members of the company who did not accept Polijn as caravan secretary were Kessan and Gonfrid. Whether they were jealous of her popularity or still resented the fact that she had been hired over their objections, she didn't know. But they clearly considered her dispensable.

"When we get north," Gon-

frid said one evening at the fire as Polijn eased her throat several places away from him in the circle of diners. "Say, Kessan, why don't we sell her? She probably looks all right when she's cleaned and dressed."

Polijn heard it but didn't look up, wanting to be sure what they meant to sell.

"Why not?" answered Kessan. "She's talented enough to bring a good price. We keep the necklace, of course."

Polijn put her hand over the amulet she wore at her neck. That seemed to make it definite. But she wasn't the only one who'd heard the business proposition. Peliapf had strong ears, able to hear a coin drop as he said, even when the wagons were rolling.

"You try it, nephew," he called across the circle, "and see how fast I marry her."

Kessan frowned. Gonfrid turned red. Eight or nine carters who hadn't heard their discussion looked over to see what was going on. Polijn raised her flute and struck up a sprightly song to distract them. The nephews left the circle and walked into the shadow of the lead wagon.

"He'd do it, too," growled Kessan, keeping his voice down so far Polijn had to strain to hear it. "Old fustock. He should've stayed home."

"We could run this route as

well as he could," Gonfrid agreed.

"Better," said Kessan. "You saw how the relic chose this road. No reasons, no explanations. Just 'we go this way' like we're mere ox herders. There's no using the northern pass; oh no. That's too easy, too new."

"Are you two boys still fretting about that?" their uncle called. Kessan and Gonfrid jumped. They had not seen him leave the circle. "It was bandits, you know. There aren't any on this road."

Kessan recovered first. "There weren't any on the other, either," he said.

"There might not have been," said his uncle, setting a hand on his shoulder. "But we know there aren't any on this."

"Well, yes," said Gonfrid. "Because we came this way, we know that. But . . ."

"Well, there you are," Peliapf replied. "Are you actually complaining because we met no bandits?" He had a hand on each of his nephews now, and was pushing them back toward the circle around the fire.

"No," sighed Kessan.

"Because we had to take the long, hard road," said Gonfrid. He realized he was being ushered forward and stopped.

His uncle stopped, too, and patted his shoulder. "Bandits love short, easy ways," said the mayor of the mobile village.

"More merchants travel those roads."

Kessan, meanwhile, had found a spot in the circle and was sitting down. "Ah, don't argue with him," he called back. "That's the longest, hardest way of all."

No one was listening to Polijn by this time, so she set down her flute. Peliapf sat down next to her and told Gonfrid, "I wouldn't have come this way had the other been open. They say Ambelon lives this way."

Kessan moaned and buried his face in his hands. The rest of the circle moved in a little closer.

"Ah, I don't believe there are wizards these days," Gonfrid replied. "They died off in ancient days: in your childhood."

"Some say they never were," said Ninachak, leaning toward the leader.

Peliapf leaned back and let his eyes widen. "You don't believe that, I hope."

The baker shrugged. "I've never met one, so I can't say."

"Neither have I, to the best of my recollection," Peliapf replied, "but here we are. All unoffending, the infant Peliapf had his doom pronounced by a wizard."

His listeners leaned forward as one, barely breathing. His nephews simply sighed.

Peliapf shrugged. "My parents failed to appease the wiz-

ards on my name day, and one of them—Ambelon, or perhaps it was Aquilon: ah, sweet moon, blow the dust from my memory!—put a curse on me. One day a left-handed hunchback will thrust a pin through my shadow and I shall die.” He considered, with every listener’s eyes locked on him. “I believe that was how it went, yes. I cannot, of course, recall all the details. I was very young at the time.”

“Ah, you were born old,” said Gonfrid.

He might have said more but was glared into silence by six of the caravan members. Peliapf was apparently lost in memory and did not notice how many of his followers were making the gestures to avert magic. Polijn raised her flute and began the song of the daughter of Ambelon and Aquilon. Everyone turned to her to hear the tale, though they certainly all had it by heart.

The next day, hardly a man, woman, or child in the caravan dared to speak to the caravan master, and any order he exerted himself to give was followed with almost dangerous speed. As a result, the whole company moved down the road at a good pace, and came upon a small town shortly past midday. Peliapf ordered the company stopped and sent Polijn and Kessan into the town to

find out how amenable the inhabitants would be to company, and whether there were signs of prosperity.

The two scouts returned quickly to report that a major festival was just getting under way. Eight wagoners immediately suggested an indefinite layover, for the purpose of turning a profit. Kessan and Gonfrid seconded this suggestion, and it was obvious that the other members of the caravan were not opposed to profitable pause.

“A festival,” mused the leader. “Then this would be Yeldariek.”

Kessan swore under his breath. “Yes,” said Gonfrid. “What of it?”

His uncle turned grave eyes on him. “You do know about Yeldariek?”

Everyone did, of course. One or two of the wagoners kicked at the dirt, repeating what Kessan had just said. “Listen, Uncle,” said Gonfrid, wagging a finger at him. “If you try to tell us . . .”

Polijn was sort of the official peacemaker on this trip, so she interjected, “Yeldariek is one of the towns mentioned in many songs as the home of Ambelon.” She stressed “one of the towns,” allowing an escape clause if Peliapf wanted one.

The caravan leader bowed in her direction. Pasqua punched

a fist into an open hand. Respect for wizards was all very well in a story, but it shouldn't be allowed to obstruct business. Five of the merchants had gotten together and were obviously discussing leaving the company.

But Peliapf could run a caravan without the help of Polijn and in spite of the subversion of its members. "I see no reason to deny you your sales simply because of the curse incurred by my parents," he announced in measured tones.

A cheer went up, but the caravan leader raised his hands and went on. "I ask but one thing, that my name not be mentioned. If anyone asks who the caravan master might be, you just say, 'That funny-looking old fat man there.' No names."

Some of the children laughed, but Peliapf's face showed no sign of a smile. "What?" demanded Ninachak. "Do you think the wizard might seek you out?"

"You said it might have been Aquilon," Pasqua reminded him. "Not Ambelon."

The caravan master replied with a massive shrug. "It may well be that the wizard is not at home, or no longer lives here," he said. "But if ever this was her village, I have no doubt that she is still well liked here. If the townspeople heard about

the curse, they might refuse to have anything to do with us. They could even turn violent. And there might well be other dangers."

"Yeah," said Gonfrid. "Somebody might prove she never heard of you before." But the other members of the caravan vowed not to mention his name or that of his family. Polijn and Kessan looked at each other and nodded.

Because in fact, though Polijn had promised Kessan that she wouldn't let any word slip about it (at least until she was out of Kessan's reach), Yeldariek was holding a water festival in Ambelon's honor. The wizard herself was expected to make a rare personal appearance at the event. Though Ambelon was accessible enough to any who dared to venture out to her house, she rarely came into town.

The village had dressed up for the occasion. Houses dripped with bright bunting, and all the people were decked in the finest festival togs: colorful but light, very light. In Rossacotta, the finery would have been piled on, but Polijn could see that would never do in a land so warm.

In and among the streets and parks and low flat buildings, small fountains sent sparkling water skyward to indicate the theme of the fair, but that theme

was contradicted by beverage wagons selling a dozen or more other liquids on every side. Almost as thick along the streets were the stands selling ornate leather goods. This was fine leather country, and several members of the caravan slowed their progress to check out the wares.

Polijn was more interested in the little outbursts of dancing around the small square crank-organs. The Silmarians had added small glass pipes filled with colored water; at each note, bubbles rolled from one side to the other.

Much as she would have liked to stop and find out how it was done, Peliapf wanted the caravan to move along to a halting place. The site he chose was an inn called The Lifted Coat. There had to be a story to explain the name; Polijn made a mental note to ask before they left town. In the innyard, she helped guide the wagons into position, and Peliapf and Gonfrid bargained with the innkeeper over stable fees. A few merchants did not wait around to see the outcome but unlimbered small carts and a few samples to take around to Yeldariek's entrepreneurs.

Kessan, Gonfrid, and Polijn had the responsibility of preventing, if possible, any unpleasant incidents between the two groups of connivers. But

first they were invited to take a drink with Peliapf inside The Lifted Coat.

"I must take up a central position where any member of my company may find me at need. But I have no intention of taking up that position in this highly overpriced establishment unless their beer be worthy." The portly caravan master strolled toward the building, waving away the expostulating innkeeper. "Come! We shall test their stock and, if it prove that one can choke it down without straining one's neck, you may take word that I am to be found here ... mentioning no names, you recall."

The four of them stepped into the common room of the inn, followed closely by their host, exclaiming both that he would have no such ungrateful wretches drinking even dish-water in his fine inn and that they should have the best in the house immediately, to judge for themselves whether he was not a benefactor of mankind, dispensing such nectar at a loss, out of sheer beneficence. Peliapf paid him no heed whatsoever but proceeded to a small room off the main gathering place. This little booth contained a table and three benches and was separated from the common room by a curtained doorway.

"It's the smoke," he explained to anyone who was listening. Dusting off a spot on one bench with a flourish of his handkerchief, he sat down. "Ah, sweet moon, I can't take a smoke any more. And fond I was of a mouthful, too. It gives me a pain through here." He raised a hand to his forehead.

The innkeeper pushed past him to open a small window in the far wall of the chamber, letting the sunlight stream in. "Well, master, we'll close out some of that. Here, Pradia, pull the curtain. Ah, you slut, you've torn it!"

A crooked little waitress looked up at a long and obviously longstanding gap in the thin red curtain. But she was clever enough not to deny the accusation. "Oh, I am sorry!" she cried, and reached into her cap for a pin. "But we'll fix that."

Peliapf had followed this exchange with minor interest. Now, however, he leaned forward and frowned. His head turned from the window to the vast shadow he was casting on the curtain.

He cleared his throat. "Jochu," he said, using the common term of address for a woman one did not know. "Was that your left hand?"

The little redhead thrust her left arm behind her back and scuttled out of reach before an-

swering, "Yes, master." She was used to being regarded as a figure of ill omen.

Her eyes bulged as the caravan master sagged, and dropped to the floor.

Polijn hit the floor right after him, kneeling to feel for a pulse. It took a couple of seconds, and the others in the alcove pushed in around her.

"He's not dead," she announced, looking up at them.

The innkeeper's sigh of relief made the curtain ripple. But Gonfrid said, "Maybe he thinks he is."

"Maybe he'll refuse to eat or drink and really die," suggested Kessan.

"No such luck," snorted Gonfrid. "Him? Refuse to eat or drink? Besides, we can't wait that long."

Not for the first time, Polijn wished she were big enough to bang some heads together. It wouldn't help, particularly, but it might hurt, which would at least cheer her up.

As it was, she contented herself with a bark of, "Innkeeper! A bed!"

The owner of The Lifted Coat gathered his wits and called out the necessary orders. Five of his stablehands took hold of Peliapf and trudged up to a loft. Kessan and Gonfrid were gone by now, hurrying out into the town to spread the word to other members of the company.

Mindful of their orders, and of the possible loss of profits or property, the merchants from the caravan mentioned neither the name Ambelon nor the name of their master. But there were enough whispers of "the curse, the curse" to bring a good percentage of the festival running to The Lifted Coat. The first arrivals found space in the tiny bedroom Peliapf had been given. Late comers had to content themselves with staring, from a safe distance, at the pin and the curtain that had been the cause of it all, whatever it was.

In Peliapf's room, the crowd crushed around the bed, offering what it no doubt regarded as helpful advice.

"Shave off his hair; spells always come to rest in the hair!"

"Boil a cat!"

"Send for the wizard! She'll know what to do."

There were several cries echoing this suggestion. "No, no!" said Kessan, taking no chances. "Let's not, er, disturb the wizard. We, uh, er..." He looked to Polijn for assistance.

"We do not like to interrupt your festival," she supplied. "The wizard comes to your town seldom enough, I hear, and it would be unmannerly for outsiders like us to disrupt the occasion."

Some members of the crowd saw the wisdom of this, and nodded, while others wanted to

debate the matter. The innkeeper was evenly divided, torn between the fear of annoying the wizard and the obvious prestige that would be earned by The Lifted Coat if she did actually come. In the midst of the argument, Polijn glanced across the bed and saw Peliapf's eyelids rise.

"Oh!" she said.

The debate ended in mid-shout. Everyone turned toward the bed to watch the caravan master's eyes come into focus and slide to the right and then the left.

"I'm alive," he said.

His tone was filled with such surprise and even a bit of displeasure that some people laughed. "Yes, Uncle," said Gonfrid. "You're alive. What's become of your curse?" He tipped back his head and crowed with contagious laughter.

A sword, Polijn thought; if only I were six feet tall and had a sword.

But Peliapf didn't notice the laughter that was expanding around the room; he was still confused to find that he was not dead and in his grave. "I may well have heard the details incorrectly," he mused. "Perhaps I shall turn slowly to stone."

The laughter of the crowd diminished noticeably; it was a possibility. "No, thank you, Uncle," said Gonfrid. "You're heavy enough as it is."

Peliapf didn't notice that, either. "It may hap that I am to fall into a deep sleep for a thousand years," he suggested. "Ah, sweet moon, I should have buried some treasure against the future!"

A woman at the door, who was either very susceptible by nature or had made herself so at the bar, sobbed, "Ah, the poor man! The poor man! A thousand years old and no money!"

There was no laughter in the crowd now at all, and everyone seemed to be coming around to her view of the matter. "Enough of this," exclaimed Kessan, reaching behind his uncle's shoulders. "There never was a curse. There never was a w . . . a curse. Come, Uncle, up with you!"

Gonfrid reached around behind Kessan and added his strength to the effort. They might have succeeded in rolling the caravan leader onto one side but Peliapf was not helping, and after just a few seconds of heaving, the cousins were pulled away by Ninachak and Donilus.

"Let him be," Donilus ordered. "It's the curse, I tell you. And you didn't believe! You . . ."

"I cannot move," Peliapf announced, cutting off the dice-maker's diatribe. "Surely my toes are becoming stone already. Well, I do not blame the people of Yeldariek. I knew I

was under a curse, and should have been watching. Gonfrid, see to it that no one overcharges the good people in vengeance. Kessan, pay the innkeeper when I am dead or stone. Is there a wagon large enough to take me on, or would it slow the company? No matter, no matter; take my farewells to your mother, in any case."

Peliapf's eyes were welling up, and he was not alone. He looked from face to face in the crowd, offering brief farewells and apologies for his infirmity, until he came to Polijn, who was down at the foot.

"You!" he exclaimed, and seemed almost ready to sit up. At least his head came forward.

Ten people, including Polijn, took a step back, and the people they stepped on in retreat were too startled to complain.

"That's it, of course!" said the caravan master, with the air of one who has solved a difficult riddle. "Polijn's amulet!"

Everyone around Polijn took another step backward. Polijn's hand went to her necklace.

The pendant, a shiny metal circle engraved with one swirling symbol, had been given to her by a rather demented sorcerer in the slums of the city of Malbeth. To date, its only power was an ability to return to her whenever it was lost or stolen. But, of course, for all Polijn knew, it might have some magic

it hadn't shown yet.

"Oh, enough!" cried Gónfrid.
"There is no curse!"

The crowd growled at him.
"Now, wait a moment," said Kessan. "She is a minstrel, isn't she?"

"A minstrel!" cried someone in a corner of the room.

"It's her curse, then!"

"The foreigner, the minstrel; she's laid a curse on him!" someone screamed down the ladder to the audience in the common room.

Hands caught at Polijn's shoulders, but before they could do any more, Peliapf said, "Good people!" The paralysis had not affected his lungs any. "Polijn is surely my rescuer, not my curse, for the curse was laid on me as an infant. It was surely only because that amulet was at hand that I am alive at this moment. Come here, child."

There were too many people bunched up at the bedside for Polijn to obey, but the hands that had been on her shoulders now hauled on the chain around her neck. Polijn did not resist, except to move her head a little to avoid being strangled. She knew the amulet would be back, so she had no objection to their taking it.

The necklace passed from hand to hand until it came to Kessan, who draped it over his uncle's head. Peliapf made an effort, and as his head came off

the pillows, and the necklace dropped to his neck, the room rang with cheers.

But it rang only once, for the great head dropped back again. "I . . . can't," panted Peliapf. "Never mind, Polijn. You tried."

"Maybe you should go to the wizard," a voice whispered just behind Polijn.

She shook her head, and called, "Innkeeper! Is there someone you can send to the wizard?"

Peliapf stared at her.

"Erumegard, no!" exclaimed the owner of The Lifted Coat. "We never bother the wizard unless it's a case of whirlwind or flood. She likes to be left alone."

"But you could go," called Ninachak. "You're a minstrel."

"Ah, minstrels and wizards speak the same language," came a shout from the ladder. "Let her go to the wizard!"

"Now, good people . . ." Peliapf began.

But Polijn found the hands on her again, and soon discovered that she was being passed from hand to hand. This was the easiest way through the room, but it lacked a little for comfort, particularly as she was handed down the ladder head first.

"She's going to the wizard," came a whisper as each person relinquished her to the next in line. "She goes to Ambelon!"

"I spoke to Ambelon once,"

someone told her, gripping her ankles with as much reverence as was possible in that position. "Don't fear."

Polijn wasn't afraid of the wizard. At the moment, she was too much concerned about the continued entirety of her neck. The wizard didn't even enter into her anxiety until she was finally set on her feet in the courtyard.

"The wizard, good woman, lives in a house just beyond the town markers," said a tall red-headed man at the gate. "Go out of town by Main Road, there, and when you come to Stone Bridge, cross over, and then follow the river to the north. You're a minstrel. It may be the wizard will open her door to you."

Polijn set off along the road indicated, to cheers of "The minstrel! The minstrel!" from the company assembled in the courtyard of The Lifted Coat. The cheers, and some of the audience, followed her quite a way down the road, but she pretended not to notice, striving for the dignity they'd expect from one they believed had a power beyond ordinary humans. This would have been easier had she not been trying to run and, at the same time, hold her clothes together where careless hands had torn them on her way out of the inn.

Soon she was outside of Yeldariek and alone on the road

except for a few late-arriving merrymakers who paid no attention to her, not having heard the story yet. Even here Polijn did not consider the wizard and whether that door would be opened to her important enough to worry about. Her chief worry at this point was whether she would turn to the north after she crossed the bridge, or just keep moving straight, straight out of the territory and out of the country. It was a dry, dusty country, in spite of its water festivals, and she had taken a severe disliking to it, particularly in the last hour or so.

Peliapf had been good to her, of course, but was that worth facing the wrath of a wizard to ask about a curse that she had serious doubts of? Wizards were above the petty spells practiced by the magicmongers who infested the forests and towns. These sorcerers and magicians practiced their complicated little curses and blessings on a day-to-day basis. They were the ones who soured ale and made crops wither, or tried to. They were the ones who had to strive for the imaginative spell, with redheaded hunchbacks and pinned shadows. Wizards, at least in the older and more reliable stories, just didn't do that. If offended, they had only to say, "Dead," and lightning would strike or the earth would swallow up the foe.

Peliapf could have been cursed by some lesser magicmonger, with the story growing as he did. Polijn doubted this. That he was alive and conscious argued that the whole thing was just the result of a story told by some playful aunt or uncle to a small boy decades ago.

It didn't matter whether or not there was a curse, though, if Peliapf believed there was. Polijn was confident that the caravan master, if he took it into his head that he had to fall asleep for a thousand years, would certainly try to do so. That meant he would either die, leaving his business to his nephews, or not die, which would lose him both his business and all the respect of his clients.

Polijn was on the bridge. Then she was over it. And then she turned north, following the river. There was a little path, so it wasn't hard walking, and she had dealt with sorcerers and necromancers before. Well, she'd talked to some, at least.

The first house she saw was a little stone building, two stories tall, covered with ivy. There was a garden in back. The whole estate was pretty but unimpressive. Yet Polijn came to a stop at the line of stepping stones that led to the door. Was it her imagination, or was the grass actually that much greener here than anywhere else along the river?

She considered once more the possibilities of simply leaving the country. Then, stepping carefully in the center of each stone, and watching for giant snakes, she moved up toward the door, took a deep breath, and rapped three times with one knuckle.

She sighed with relief when no sound came in reply. This was the wrong place, no one was home, and she could move on. She was turning around when the door opened.

She peeked in through the crack but could see only shadow. She put a hand on the door and pushed, but it didn't open any farther. Something said, "Yes?"

Polijn looked down, now, where the voice had come from, and leaped backward before two dark, shining eyes that stared up at her. "I..." she said, and couldn't think of even another letter to follow it.

"We'll come to the festival when we're ready," said the little woman behind the door. "They've waited two and a half years since the wizard came to town; they can wait for her another half hour."

The door started to close. "Is the wizard here?" Polijn asked. "Could I talk to her? It's an emergency."

The door paused. "What is it?" demanded the doorkeeper. "Is Morilan getting worse? No, wait." The eyes raked up and

down Polijn's person. Polijn put her hands over the larger tears in her tunic. "You're not from the town."

"No, milady," said Polijn, drawing on her store of professional aplomb. "I am Polijn, a minstrel. I must talk with the wizard."

"Oh, a minstrel, eh?" demanded the woman, pulling back on the door. "The wizard, eh? Come in, then. What have you to say?"

Polijn stepped just inside the door and found a neat little vestibule with a plain wooden floor. She blinked. She had rather been expecting giant snakes.

"Well?" demanded the little woman, tapping her foot.

"My, er, message is really for the wizard alone," Polijn told her.

"Oh, I see," said the woman with a mocking little bow. She gave the door a push and it thumped shut. "Well, then, we have problems. While you're with me, I can't be alone."

"Oh!" Polijn goggled. "You're not . . ."

The woman sniffed. "I am so. Nothing says the wizard has to be nine feet tall, spitting fire." She took two steps toward Polijn, who took three back, and stuck out her chin. "What did you expect? Giant snakes?"

Polijn licked her lips. As a matter of fact, the stories and songs were just a bit vague

about what wizards looked like. The ones about Ambelon said mainly that she was slender and had long black hair; the woman did fit both of those qualifications. She was not described at all in the tragic tale of her daughter; but she didn't *look* like someone who was part of a tragic tale. Of course, it had all happened a thousand years ago or more.

Ambelon was also, in the tales, renowned for a certain lack of patience, and had begun to tap her foot again. With reluctance (the woman had disconcertingly clear features, all but blazing out of the darkness of the room, and very direct eyes), Polijn outlined her emergency.

The wizard did not stop tapping her foot and, in fact, folded her arms with an air of acute dissatisfaction. When Polijn had finished, she stood watching with pursed lips and then snapped, "You do know there's no curse?"

Polijn nodded. "Yes, milady. I suspected it."

The arms unfolded and the mouth slid into half a smile. "Well, thank goodness for that, at least. People get such odd ideas about wizards." She tipped her head to one side. "People get odd ideas, period."

She considered Polijn with those unblinking eyes. Polijn wished there had been time to

stop and find out just where the tunic and breeches were torn, and how badly.

"Then I suppose you also suspect what a blow it would be to your Peliapf's prestige if I were to lift the curse that isn't there?" Ambelon demanded.

"Yes," said Polijn, and swallowed. "But I wondered . . ."

She stopped, not knowing how amenable a wizard might be to suggestion. It was hard for her to keep in mind that this woman, no taller than mouthy little Iunartar back home, had powers beyond anything she had ever seen before. Having, by one account, stared down an undead aristocrat and reduced him to powder, Ambelon might respond to a presumptuous slum rat's ideas with exceedingly painful scorn.

But the wizard ordered, "Go on," so Polijn gathered her breath and made her suggestion without an *um* or *er*. She had no stomach for being blasted, but at least she had her stage presence.

She nearly dived for the door when Ambelon applauded. Surely that was the signal for the giant snakes to come eat up the intruder.

Instead, Ambelon put one hand on her guest's shoulder, preventing flight. "I like you," said the wizard. "You're sneaky. Nice sneaky, I mean. Just a minute."

Ambelon took up a cape and threw it over her small shoulders. "That should cover anything that's lacking in the wardrobe," she said. "Let's go."

Polijn reached for the door-latch, but the wizard's hand was there first. "After you," said Ambelon.

It took all Polijn's self-possession to walk forward out the door. Where she came from, being allowed to step through the door first frequently heralded an old but still popular trick. But one didn't insult a wizard by suspecting her.

"Ah, what a fine day for a festival," said Ambelon, taking a deep breath. She looked from the house to the pathway along the river. Polijn looked at her. Her dress was a deep green, devoid of ornament, and the cape was a sky blue. Like the face above them, they seemed sharp, aggressive, even outside now in the sunlight.

The face came around and studied Polijn right back. "I'd race you to town," said Ambelon, "but I hate to sweat in my school clothes and you look like you've had a long morning. Did you run all the way?"

"Well, no, I . . ."

"Never mind," said the wizard, raising a hand. "Maybe you always look like that when dropping in on a wizard. Besides, they probably expect me to make a Grand Entrance."

She arched one hand in the air and raised an eyebrow on the words "Grand Entrance." Polijn smiled, feeling it was expected of her.

"So let's be off," said Ambelon, and swept her cape around her.

If Polijn had harbored any doubts that this little woman was really Ambelon, they were dispersed as the cloud formed around them. A second later, the cloud vanished, and the two were standing in the courtyard of The Lifted Coat.

Six people in their vicinity raised a cry of "The wizard!" Everyone who had room dropped to one knee, or fell flat on the none too clean yard.

"I should discourage that, I suppose," said Ambelon out of one corner of her mouth as she trotted through the yard to the inn among kneeling townspeople. "But it's the only way I ever get to see anything. They grow 'em tall in Yeldariek."

Then, louder, she declared, "Show me this Peliapf who has dared to set foot within my reach!"

The door of the inn was opened to her. She winked at Polijn and stepped inside.

The crowding at the inn was even worse than when Polijn had left. Yet everyone found room to kneel or bow and take half a step back to make room. Spectators leaped from the lad-

der to land on their fellow celebrants when the wizard indicated she wanted to go up. Polijn followed, restraining, with an effort, her curiosity about whether wizards wore underwear. It was the latest style back home.

"So!" Ambelon exclaimed, forcing her way into the tiny bedroom, where even respect couldn't make room that didn't exist. "This is Peliapf, is it? You have even less hair than when I saw you last, and I doubt you have any more wit."

Kessan and Gonfrid pulled away from the head of the bed, their mouths hanging open, soundless. "Milady..." the caravan master began, pale as death but still able to talk.

"Silence!" ordered the wizard, with a wave and a flutter of fingers. "I should have known one of your graceless family would come to town at the wrong time." She stamped one foot, and five onlookers fainted. "I will not have my festival ruined. I hereby lift the curse from your worthless person. Rise, Peliapf!"

Peliapf blinked, and put out one hand to the coverlet over him. As he pushed it aside and swung his feet off the bed, the room shook with cheers.

Ambelon sent an affronted stare at the crowd, and all cheers stopped. "Milady," said Peliapf, his voice weak in the sudden

silence, "I don't know how to thank..."

"I didn't think you would," she informed him. She waggled a finger under the nose of the caravan master, who was taller sitting on the bed than she was standing up. "But don't you think that you have gotten the better of a member of the race of wizards simply because of your stupid timing. I lay another curse on you in place of the other, that you will one day sustain a bruise from a bracelet of copper, mined in Gilraën and formed in Diarrio. Your skin shall turn green, what hair you have left will turn white, and you shall grow rabbit's ears, so that all may know you die accursed. I extend a truce between my family and yours until sunset, but then begone!"

Peliapf bowed his head. "I shall certainly obey your commands, milady," he said.

"Good," said the wizard. "The only other order I have for you is to buy these good people a drink." She waved around the room and cheers shook the walls again. The crowd rushed in with congratulations, and Polijn lost sight of bed, wizard, Peliapf, and all.

The Lifted Coat did excellent business, as did the members of Peliapf's company, which could swap not only its goods but its stories of what went on in the little room above the inn. Even

those members of the company who had not actually gotten into The Lifted Coat in time to find room upstairs had only to mention the names of Peliapf and Ambelon to enhance the value of their goods in the eyes of their customers. Polijn was kept busy running from merchants to their wagons in the courtyard, to make sure there was still room for the goods they were taking on for the journey north.

In her travels up and down the streets of Yeldariek, she did spy Ambelon once or twice, and felt a bit of remorse on seeing the crowds that gathered around the wizard. Naturally, that exhibition of power at The Lifted Coat had brought forth a whole slew of requests to improve the weather, raise or lower the level of the river, and augment the harvest.

The sun was easing toward the horizon as Polijn, trying to push among the celebrants, found herself up against a little raised plaza outside a large inn. "No, no, I can't make your turnips the largest in the country," she heard Ambelon say. "You know it's the small ones that have all the flavor; the big ones just rot faster. Besides, it would crowd out your radishes, and those are going to be really fine this year."

Polijn would have pressed on, but the wizard spied her and

called her to the little table. "Bring Polijn, the minstrel here, a mug," she ordered. "And another bowl of your breadsticks." The inn's owner hustled away. Ambelon confided, "I wouldn't do that for just anybody, but you're leaving town, so I don't have to worry about you bothering the life out of me for the rest of the century. How's Peliapf?"

"Very well, milady," said Polijn, poising herself on the very edge of the chair so as not to appear too casual. "Ten people run whenever he gives an order."

"Excellent," said the wizard, with a bob of her head. "We've salvaged both his prestige and mine."

A mug was set before Polijn by the inn's owner, who then bowed and backed away. The bowl of breadsticks appeared at the wizard's elbow, placed there by another retreating servant.

Polijn took the mug and sipped from it so as not to seem to refuse Ambelon's hospitality. (She had already been offered free ale or beer from one end of Yeldariek to the other, and had had to start turning it down.) Then she asked, "Was that a real curse you pronounced over him?"

The wizard took a breadstick and bit off the end before answering with a shrug, "I have no doubt if he does bruise himself on such a bracelet, some-

thing will happen. I said it would, didn't I? And you look far too wise, woman, to doubt the word of a wizard."

She took another bite of breadstick. "But since they have never mined copper in Gilraën, and the Diarrians find working with any metal besides gold or silver demeaning, he's going to have to hunt some to find the bracelet. You don't have to be a wizard to look into the future and say the chances are slim. My guess is he topples over some day trying to help haul a cartwheel out of a rut in a muddy road, but that's just a guess. No foreknowledge at all."

She disposed of the breadstick in four more bites. Polijn took another sip of the beer and then said, "I . . . can't ever repay you."

Ambelon reached across the table and patted her hand before she could pull it back. "You already have," said the wizard. "I'm like anyone else in this hole-in-the-hill town: a little diversion is always welcome. And it was the least exhausting magic, certainly, that I've done in ages."

The wizard took another breadstick. "Besides, if it hadn't been for that exhibition, some of these inkeepers would be expecting me to pay for my beer."

Polijn smiled, but her attention was elsewhere. She could hear the voice of Donilus raised

in argument over the price of good dice, as compared with the kegs of ale some innkeeper was offering to trade. Peering among the shifting crowd, she spied him half a block down the street. He had reached the fist-shaking stage, and his wife was behind him and looking for Ninachak to come up with reinforcements.

Polijn took one more sip from the mug, and then stood up. "I'd better go, milady," she said.

Ambelon nodded. "Don't let Frugje cheat him," she said, pushing the bowl of breadsticks across the table: "Waters the beer."

"All our thanks to you again, milady," Polijn answered, taking two of the breadsticks for future reference. "The story will make a good song."

"So we have augmented your prestige as well," said the wiz-

ard, with another nod. "Would you like me to look at your future? For real?"

Polijn didn't even hesitate. "No."

"When I was your age, I wouldn't have wanted to know, either," said the wizard. "In fact, when I was your age . . . well, let it pass."

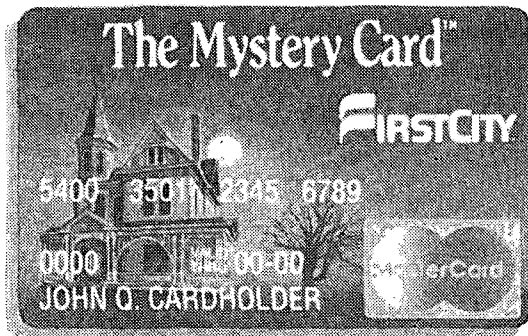
Polijn spied a gap in the crowd and started forward. The wizard raised her voice. "But I can tell you one day you'll have little girls wishing they could grow up to be just like you. I hope it does you more good than it does me."

Polijn stopped, stymied by the sudden passage of a wheelbarrow laden with over-served celebrants. Well, she thought, dodging around the driver, that was nice and vague; no redheads or hunchbacks. That kind of future was lighter to carry.

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FICTION



Unbearable Temptations

by Jeffry Scott



Illustration by Timothy Standish

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He swears that it's never his fault and may even believe that. Manganelle, with his autopsy-conducting gaze and face the color of rare steak, is my least likeable and most worrying friend. Ancient Norsemen have shunned him as an ill-bringer. He's a lightning conductor for scandal and worse; lumbers through such storms without so much as a scorchmark, leaving charred victims in his path. This makes him uneasy though interesting company.

Eric Manganelle is a journalist, so he has been everywhere and seen everything. Par for the course, except that he probably *caused* most of everything as well.

We ran into each other at Palmcastle on England's soft and seemingly south coast recently. Palmcastle is where mildly affluent, strongly elderly Britons wait for death. They crave dignity and are confident of their passing's arousing minimal fuss because hardly anyone will be able to tell the difference. Even the waves break in an undertone there, and thunder neither rolls nor rumbles overhead. It clears its throat—diffidently at that.

Nothing ever happens at Palmcastle, that's what Palmcastle is for. When I laid this insight on Eric Manganelle, he

sneered like a silent movie heavy, as if to say, "Much you know." But what he did say over the first of many scotches, none going on his bill, was: "I'll tell you something funny about Beirut."

"Nothing's funny about Beirut." We'd spent too long there, starting with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut, on through the PLO's departure and beyond.

"Shut up," he remarked, "I'm telling this. The funny thing about Beirut, seeing that it was the capital of a country where anarchy had been the norm for a decade or so *before* our impulsive friends from Jerusalem kicked the front door down and started smashing the china, is that it was such a terribly safe place."

He took my breath away. Finally I said feebly, "Sorry to bother you with the facts, but I was there, remember. Safe place? The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have been using Beirut for their stable, years on end."

"Oh, that," he grunted, dismissing air raids, sniping, shelling, rockets, and seventy different factions of the PLO alone. "Yes, there was fighting and so forth—"

"Ever the trained observer, Mangy. Nothing escapes your attention, born reporter."

"But apart from that," Manganelle persisted, "it was a very safe place. Think about it, if you're capable. S-a-f-e, providing you were a genuine civilian or a hack, a journo, with the right accreditation documents. Keep a civil tongue in your head, lie low when it got noisy, and none of the citizenry or warriors would look at you crosswise. This was before the hostage-taking lunacy, mark you. Can you deny it?"

"Well, maybe . . ."

"No maybe about it. Remember how we'd blunder about at night, feeling no pain, wandering down the most appalling dark alleys and getting thoroughly lost? There was always a crone or a thug with an assault rifle and a checked tea towel on his head who'd pop up to show the way back to the Commodore. Dozens of us, bouncing about after dark, loaded with cash, expensive cameras, and tape recorders. Answer me this: did you ever get mugged? Did you ever hear of *anybody* getting mugged, rolled, having their pocket picked?"

"No," I conceded, "now you mention it. They must have been too busy with their war to waste time on that kind of thing."

"Just so. Israel was hammering the PLO, the Christians

were hammering the Muslims and vice-versa, and most of them had a bash at the Druse when otherwise unoccupied," Manganelle recalled. "Yet foreign civilians could get away with things they'd never risk in London, New York, Paris. Indulge in conduct rightly regarded as hazardous in civilized cities, such as braving those aforementioned dark alleys, asking total strangers for directions—really reckless, provocative stuff of that persuasion."

"I was there," I repeated; "stop lecturing me."

"Reminding, old boy, reminding. It was a few years ago, fine detail soon blurs into mush at your time of life." Only Manganelle can drink on your tab without a word of thanks, let alone acknowledgment, before implying senility in his benefactor.

Driven to waspishness, I said, "Talking of getting old, when somebody keeps hanging on and on with the same remark it's a sure sign he's over the hill."

Either Manganelle had been hit by the hideous possibility of buying his liquor or he was treating me to a look of hurt dignity. "I'm establishing the context, you blockhead. Setting the stage for the last untold drama of Beirut in '82, the strange affair of Lancelot Pas-over."

"Never heard of him," I scoffed. "Fine old Middle Eastern name, though. Skipper of a trading dhow, was he?"

"That's the way, glory in your ignorance." He snapped his fingers and grinned balefully. "Ah yes, you never met Pasover. You'd sneaked away to loll about in Cyprus when the going got tough, leaving stauncher colleagues to face shot and shell."

I had sneaked away on a stretcher and been absent for all of two weeks, before returning with an ankle in plaster but raring to go, sort of. Perhaps I forgot to mention Eric Manganelle's compassion and his obsessive concern to show professional rivals' conduct in the best possible light.

Once we'd sorted that out, unprintable on my side, he complained, "D'you want to wrangle like a nasty little guttersnipe or hear about Pasover?"

"Is there a choice?"

Deliberately dense, Manganelle agreed, "It's a choice story, certainly, the . . . the . . ." My heart sank, for Manganelle adores excruciating puns. "The passing over of Lancelot Pasover," he boomed, sizzling with satisfaction.

He wagged a fat finger, tip beveled flat from striking sundry million typewriter keys. "Pasover died in a far land, a foreign field, but he was a

Palmcastle man born and bred. Which is why I'm here—in at the death, all over again."

Eric Manganelle is a good reporter, but even a bad one would have done well in Beirut during the early years of the eighties. You couldn't very well miss the story, for instance.

There was too much story, if anything. Or rather, too many of them, all squeezed between the city's Green Line frontier, held by the Israeli army with its Lebanese Christian onlookers, and the sea a mile or so away, to which the PLO and Muslim militias of East Beirut had their backs.

It was an extraordinary time and matching place, not at all what outsiders could expect from words such as "siege." Bombs fell, shells slammed home, Israeli missiles lanced in from their gunboats, making savage echoes chatter among the tower blocks. Assault rifles were fired in the air as a gesture of defiance or simply to clear traffic for an ambulance. Sometimes all these incidents took place within the same few minutes, which was hard on the nerves.

Yet between whiles and occasionally *during* whiles, West Beirut's life went on, dinners were served, people strolled, business was done. And there

were a lot of people: TV and print journalists and their entourages by the scores, volunteer doctors and nurses, United Nations officials, representatives of international charities, questing executives impatient for the shooting to stop so they could start dealing.

Some of them, Mangellette reasoned, had to be spooks —intelligence men under cover. His paper loves that sort of thing, so Mangellette set about locating an agent. He never did, not provably, but he did meet Lancelot Pasover.

Incredibly, considering that Lebanon had been a killing ground for so long, there remained a sizable expatriate community. This included French nationals who'd been around Beirut since its pre-war days as a colony, Americans connected with the university, and Britons who taught English for a living, served in bars, or generally hung out.

Lancelot Pasover's reason for being there was so odd that Mangellette felt sure he must be a spook. Then he looked again, sighed, and scrapped the idea.

Mangellette noticed Pasover in the lobby of the Commodore hotel one morning. Pasover caught his bloodshot eye and smiled goofily, a balding young

fellow in sandals over tartan socks, baggy lightweight suit, and a hand-knitted tie, lopsided and full of dropped stitches.

"Hello," Pasover beamed, "are you British by any chance, sir?" Which was such a bloody silly question, nearly an insult, that Mangellette harrumphed at him in fury.

But he was bored and at a loose end until Arafat's daily press briefing, so Mangellette bought Lancelot Pasover breakfast — putting it on the bill of an unwary new chum from the *Washington Post*, naturally.

"What am I doing here? Sometimes I ask myself that," Pasover answered the obvious question.

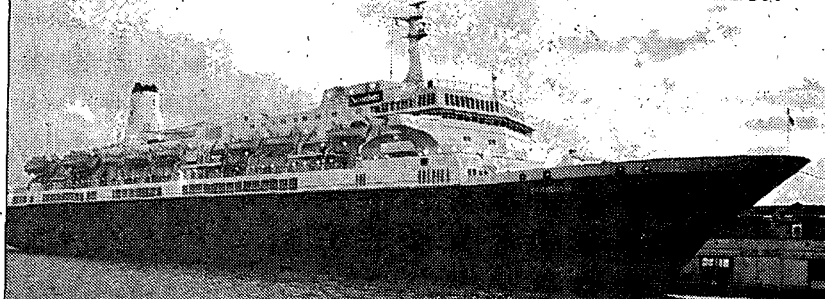
"Never mind the epigrams," Mangellette entreated sourly.

Young Pasover nodded, still smiling. He was too dim to have hurt feelings. "Well, sir, I'm just settling up Auntie's estate. Soon as that's done, and I'm confident of success within days, I shall be back to Palmcastle like an arrow. Anne's missing me dreadfully. Anne is my wife. You know how women are, they need a strong, protective male at hand."

"I hope she finds one," Mangellette grunted.

Oblivious, Pasover prattled on. "I have been here five weeks, imagine! My first time out of

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England." This intrigued his listener; Beirut seemed a decidedly rum place to launch one's overseas vacations.

Lancelot Pasover was surprised. "It's not a holiday, Mr. Manganelle. I told you, my aunt died and left me her business. I'm just selling it, fixtures, fittings, and good will. Er, would you like to see the place?"

The upshot was that they agreed to meet at Auntie's place that afternoon. Given the address, Manganelle's driver shook his head. "Nothing there, all gone," was his laconic verdict.

"Rubbish," Manganelle boomed. "You're idle, Abu Droopydrawers, you want to sleep in your motor all day, eating your head off at my expense. Here's the street and the number, that little twit wrote them as plain as day. Take me there, instantly."

Soon he saw what the driver was getting at. They went down to the port area past what had been the Middle East's largest, most modern Holiday Inn, by then the world's largest, most modern disused Holiday Inn. But that was in terrific shape compared to the streets down which the battered Merc began rolling. Civil war had turned whole blocks into something uncommonly like Hiroshima or Dresden after the bombing; derelict, abandoned cliff dwell-

ings, blurred holes where windows, doors or projectiles had been.

After two or three sharp arguments, the driver spotted an unsuspected alleyway, backed up, and there at the far end of the cul-de-sac was Lancelot Pasover's inheritance. The driver grumbled in liquid Arabic and curled up on the bench front seat; Manganelle waddled off for a closer look.

The closer he got, the more intense was his unkind amusement, so that by the time he reached the doorstep, Manganelle was wheezing and quivering helplessly.

The little building was only two floors high, facade tinted a defeated, long-faded amber from what had once been brave red. Over the door a signboard bore the ghost of block letters: SOPHIE'S CAFE***TEA LIKE MOTHER MAKES***REAL FISH AND CHIPS***CLEAN BEDS UPSTAIRS. Obviously it hadn't been active in years.

The door creaked open, a bell jangled pathetically. Lancelot Pasover, defensive at Manganelle's cruel mirth, mumbled, "Well, it's the off-season," which made the reporter bray with laughter.

"It's not funny," Pasover said reproachfully. Then he brightened. "Come on in, sir. I've been thinking, maybe you could put

a bit in your paper about my looking for a buyer—”

“Do leave off,” Manganelle pleaded, “you’ll do me a mischief. Lance, you must be short of a full deck, lights on but nobody in, that class of behavior. Nobody’s going to buy your auntie’s caff.”

“Don’t say that.” Alarmingly, Pasover’s eyes filled with tears: “I’ve come all this way, it’s got to work out!” And he explained about his Aunt Sophie, who in 1945 had married a Lebanese entrepreneur who turned out to be a Lebanese hotel porter. The new Mrs. Sophie Habib had come to terms with the disaster, worked hard and saved harder, and set up her cafe.

No doubt it did well enough before Lebanon’s nightmare began, when cruise ships still called and British crewmen and package tourists were in the market for a taste and sound of home, within sight of the quays. “It was doing very well,” Aunt Sophie’s nephew kept saying, “and she always promised it would come to me when she, um, left us. Which she did, her heart, she was well into her eighties. I came straight here, war or no war. It’s my birth-right, Mr. Manganelle!”

Manganelle couldn’t decide whether to giggle or weep when Lancelot patted the rusted urn, fount of Tea Like Mother Made,

or declared that this was a prime site and must have value. Beirut was full of prime sites, primer by far. Walk in under the right flag or bearing a big enough gun, and the lease was yours. . . .

“I’m sure it will work out, Lance,” Manganelle lied, and fled to his car. He considered writing an ironic little feature piece on Lancelot Pasover and his doomed enterprise, but it would take too much explaining and the vision of an innocent dunce peddling a teashop went right against the grain of all the “I See Hell In World’s Most Dangerous City” copy that Manganelle was filing.

Still, it was a cracker of an anecdote, something to dine out on—in his case, booze out on. He told it well, funny voice for Lancelot, vivid description, until Manganelle had only to show his hideous face in the Commodore’s bar for somebody to groan, “No more caff, Mangy, okay?”

Probably Lancelot Pasover overheard one such recital, since he stopped his wistful patrols of the hotel lobby and dropped out of sight.

Manganelle resumed the half-serious quest for spooks. Harry Lamburn seemed promising. Lamburn wasn’t staying at the Commodore; nobody seemed sure where he was based or ex-

actly what he did. Harry Lamburn was one of those men who always knows first names, even before introduction, and who is good company without saying anything memorable.

"Business," he replied vaguely, when Manganelle asked. "Passing through, bit of a hitch because of this siege nonsense, all be sorted out in a day or two. Between ourselves, I think the deal's cooked. Rightly, I should be in Abu Dhabi, selling some tugs. But you know how things can be..." His gesture was equally vague.

Not a spook, Manganelle sensed, but Harry Lamburn was a touch bogus somehow. A crook, then? More than likely. Lebanon's national products being mayhem and drugs, the latter a thriving rural industry, it would figure.

Harry Lamburn knew of Palmcastle, hardly surprising since he was English and Palmcastle is both premier resort and a synonym for sedate retirement. So Manganelle tried the Lancelot Pasover tale on him, the saga of Palmcastle's wandering dabbler in real estate. Lamburn was flatteringly amused and attentive.

Too attentive, Manganelle considered, and was ready to snap, "Oi, this is *my* story!" before assuring himself that Lam-

burn was no journalist and therefore it didn't matter, he would not pinch the piece and pass it off under his byline.

Manganelle had met Lancelot Pasover on a Wednesday, and exactly eight days later was drowsing in the Commodore lobby when his driver scurried in and sleeve-twitched him awake. "What?" Manganelle exploded. "How d'you know, Abu Droopydrawers?"

The driver spread his hands in amused contempt at such naivete. Everyone in West Beirut knew everything as soon as it occurred—often before, since bustling streets like Hamra had a trick of clearing a minute or so before shelling or air raids.

"Take me there," Manganelle ordered. Sophie's Caff was locked, there was no sign of Lancelot Pasover's body, and the local police in their smart, milky-coffee uniforms, were staying firmly the southern side of the Green Line and out of the city's besieged half.

But with the driver translating, Manganelle got a story of sorts from neighbors—there were neighbors even in that wasteland, several refugee families sheltering in a gutted warehouse round the corner from the cafe—and men of a militia checkpoint in the main street.

That morning Lancelot Pas-

over had been found dead in the alley leading to Sophie's Caff. He had been bludgeoned, his pocket linings pulled out, his watch was missing. Eerily, civilians and militiamen alike were indignant over the crime and faintly suspicious and accusing as they answered the driver while staring at Manganelle. The victim was foreign, Inglesi, the fat man was foreign, Inglesi; no local could have done this, and a non-local had returned to the scene . . .

"We go now, I think," the driver murmured, from inside the Merc. "'Nough said," his master agreed, and they got the hell out of there. Manganelle found his original notes on the meet with Pasover, neatly filed on the back of an envelope screwed up and discarded under the bed in his shared room. That reminded him how the name was spelled and gave Pasover's age.

Manganelle phoned the story to his foreign desk, but it ended up as a single sentence because on that day Arafat left Beirut and Fleet Street was intent on larger matters than a single violent robbery in a place notorious for sudden death in large amounts.

Months later, the following year in fact, Manganelle was back in London, and among mail awaiting him was a letter

from a Foreign Office functionary, asking for details of Lancelot Pasover's demise. Also a letter from a firm of Palmcastle solicitors, seeking much the same information. He dictated one answer for both parties, telling everything as far as he knew. Mainly hearsay, Manganelle warned, though just before leaving Lebanon for good, he had been called to Police Headquarters in East Beirut, then taken to a mortuary where he'd identified Pasover's corpse.

Rather belated that, Manganelle felt. But the authorities were anxious to show law and order, or a semblance, returning to both sides of the Green Line. Motions had been gone through and that was that.

He wondered whether he might write to the widow—Anne, he remembered the name—but what he did was let the matter slide into the trinket box of memoirs, boasts, and tall stories at the back of his mind.

Now we reach Eric Manganelle's role as catalyst and card-carrying ill-bringer.

Banish carping doubts that it all depended on a whacking great coincidence, for the overt element of chance is delusive. He was a journalist, and many Fleet Street men go to Palmcastle in the conference season

sooner or later. He liked women, and Mrs. Lamburn was a woman, no mistake. The Lamburns were invited to most civic receptions—he wealthy, she decorative—while Manganelle went to receptions regardless of official invitation, on the principle of receptions being where the booze was.

All that being so, the outcome was as near inevitable as makes no odds.

Manganelle fell out with his editor, no great challenge. The editor made him cover an ecology conference at Palmcastle by way of punishment. It wasn't so bad. Manganelle took a suite at the four-star Royal Courier Hotel and improved idle hours by ringing cronies in Australia, Africa, Malaysia to ask what the weather was like there. Bills went direct to his paper, no sordid money would be demanded from him. Punishment can cut both ways.

He even attended conference sessions, slumbering benignly if noisily before lounging back to tear the Press Association report from the machine in the Royal Courier's lobby and phone it in, not a word altered. Nothing was printed, he did not expect it to appear; the whole thing was a bit of a joke. Though the *Intelligencer's* shareholders might have missed the cream of the jest.

Gratifyingly, Palmcastle's city fathers threw a party on the final day. Manganelle trundled along on the promenade from his hotel to a yet larger, more opulent one, a seasoned campaigner marching towards the sound of the guns—champagne corks, anyway.

This was his sort of occasion. The Splendide's ballroom was a human sea dotted with white linen islands where waiters toiled to keep the alcohol flowing. And there was, in Eric Manganelle's dewily romantic phrase, A Lot of Crumpet About. Women in the plural, delightfully diverse, birds of every species and plumage or lack of it.

Manganelle confesses to being a closet heterosexual. He guzzled champagne, he grew gently amorous, he feasted on flashes of rounded knee and bobbing bosom, he ogled and leered and his furry eyebrows bounced in yo-yo mode. Success with women, he believes, is akin to selling vacuum cleaners during the Great Depression. Prospects may be bleak, but knock at a hundred doors and you're bound to make one sale. . . .

Maybe it only works with vacuum cleaners. Manganelle had to settle for a toothy, gaunt maiden with a squint and a motormouth who knew everybody. It was her job, as social columnist for the weekly rag,

the Palmcastle *Herald*. Ms. Pötter, for it was she, was thrilled to hobnob with one of Fleet Street's finest.

Fresh from being snubbed, teased, or laughingly rejected by many of Palmcastle's pretty ladies, he was willing to settle for Mandy Potter's company. Her running commentary was fitfully witty, unless that was the champagne. Manganelle had been pumping her in an abstracted way when glancing up . . .

A magnificent creature, just his type: plenty of miles on the clock but bodywork in splendid condition and a classic never ages. (Take the sexism up with Manganelle, please; he's the one telling it.) "I think," he purred, "I have just fallen in love."

"Anne Lamburn, Mr. Lamburn's wife," Mandy whispered, making "Mr. Lamburn" sound a name that mattered. Adding cattily, "She's attractive if you like a blast from the past, all Hollywood B-pictures and Spirit of the Forties." In truth, Anne Lamburn was wearing a strapless dress and black gloves to the elbow, auburn hair falling over one eye to foam on her ivory shoulders. Only the long cigarette holder was missing, and perhaps a few bars of Glenn Miller in the background.

Fair-mindedly, Mandy con-

ceded, "It's ever so romantic about the Lamburns, a real fairytale. They were sweethearts at school but somebody else cut him out, and Mr. Lamburn—a teenager at the time, wild—made terrible scenes and got in trouble and Lord knows what. But then he made his fortune and they found each other again in the twilight of their lives, so to speak."

Manganelle choked on his drink. Mrs. Lamburn was forty years old, maximum, and thus a mere slip of a girl in his estimation.

"Enough frivolity," he hissed, "duty calls," and jostled away through thickets of guests. Mrs. Lamburn appeared to be without an escort for the moment, and he'd devised a thin yet just about tolerable pretext to pester her. Planting himself before Anne Lamburn, he took her hand (she started, focused on him out of a daydream, and was palpably displeased by the view) and made a fairly revolting kissing sound half an inch above her captive fingers. The slight bow involved in this courtliness enabled him to peer earnestly into her cleavage. "Eric Manganelle, *Daily Intelligencer*."

"How nice for you." Hand snatched back, she turned a shoulder, searching for rescue.

"You were pointed out to me, Mrs. Lamburn, and the name

struck a friendly chord. Good ol' Harry spent hours eulogizing his lovely wife, and I wondered . . . Harry Lamburn, we were out in Lebanon together; a relation of yours' by any chance?"

He was agreeably surprised when she swung round, lips parted. "Lebanon . . . Harry?" She was puzzled. "How strange."

"Sorry?"

Touching his arm, Anne Lamburn said, "You must wonder what on earth I'm talking about. My present husband's never been to Lebanon, you see, but my first . . . died there." Her tone hardened as she corrected herself. "He was killed in Beirut."

Appalled, he stammered, "Awfully sorry, never dreamed that—"

"Please don't worry about it. That was in 1982, I'm used to it." Mrs. Lamburn's smile was not happy. "Complete adjustment: it must be, I have remarried."

He was aware of sharp interest in her glance, and not so fuddled that he mistook it for flirtation. Further, the significance of what she'd been saying had just started to sink in.

Both Anne Lamburn and he glimpsed patent-leather hair and a brace of glasses held aloft as their bearer edged through the throng. Manganelle's vis-

ual memory was exceptional: he'd last seen that shiny-topped head with ruled parting pool-side at the Commodore hotel.

Mrs. Lamburn lowered her voice, hurried and almost conspiratorial. "You were in Beirut. Maybe you met my husband, my rea—first husband? His name was Lancelot Pasover?"

"Naturally I agreed to meet her next morning," Eric Manganelle told me. "Spare me the dying codfish look. I wasn't planning to make a pass, any fool could tell our Annie was a one-man woman; one at a time, least-ways.

"But I wanted her side of the story, for my own satisfaction. I was getting a grip on the original story for the first time, come to that. I beat it before Harry Lamburn saw us together. Oh yes, it was the same Harry, my chap in Beirut, the good listener.

"It was all rather silly, I hired a car after breakfast and drove out to Hardpath Heights, the cliffs beyond Palmcastle. Local beauty spot, see all the way to France on a clear day though why one should make the effort is a mystery to me, bloody Frogs doing Froggy things at extreme range. . . ."

I sighed stagily, and Manganelle glowered. "Anne Lamburn was waiting for me there, in a Bentley if you please, this year's model. I decided I'd been right about her old man, Harry. *was* a crook. And a murderer, of course."

"Of course. Sticks out a mile."

Manganelle gave me a pitying look. "Don't act stupid, old lad, you have a head start in that department as it is. Come on, Harry Lamburn is besotted with Anne, but she married Supertwit, little Lancelot Pasover. Instead. Harry throws a tremendous wobbly, vows revenge, camps on her family's doorstep saying he'll never give her up. Local scandal, police called, finally her parents go to court and get an order against Harry, forbidding him to approach their daughter."

"Harry storms off to seek his fortune in foreign climes, Anne is wed to Lancelot. Time passes, Pasover goes on his fool's errand to Beirut, I—all unwittingly, mind—zero Harry Lamburn in on him. Lo and behold, Pasover is murdered and suddenly Harry is nowhere to be seen. I never noticed at the time, but Lamburn made himself scarce directly after Lancelot Pasover was killed. Shot off to Cyprus, then a flight to anywhere. It was happening all the time. The Israelis con-

trolled PLO movements but Brits could come and go as they liked, we were flitting back and forth like swallows."

"Granted, Lamburn could have done it. So could a quarter of a million other likely suspects—anyone within a few square miles of him," I objected.

"Twaddle! He had the motive, means, and opportunity, isn't that the standard litany? And there's more. . . .

"Anne Lamburn apologized for our cloak and dagger date but said it had to be that way because her husband was neurotically jealous and possessive, always checking on her. She often came out to the Heights so if anyone mentioned seeing the Bentley, Harry Lamburn wouldn't find it suspicious."

"'Harry lost me once and he isn't rational about it, he cannot believe it will not happen again,' Anne told me. That was when she filled me in on the teenage melodrama when Lancelot Pasover swept her off her feet. Hard to picture Lance sweeping the floor, even, but women are funny."

"Before she could ask me about meeting Lancelot in Beirut, I pretended to forget our conversation the previous evening and asked her if Harry Lamburn had ever been there. No, she said, definitely not, he'd made his pile in Africa and

never set foot anywhere in the Middle East. Harry had made a sentimental journey back to Palmcastle, heard of her bereavement through mutual friends, and was astonished to learn that his teenage obsession had been widowed for six months . . . ”

“Aha!”

“Well put,” Manganelle approved. “My very thought at the time. That’s when I *knew* Lamburn had polished off his rival. Why lie? Because if he told Anne that he’d been to Beirut all right, and her husband happened to be rubbed out during Harry’s brief visit . . . you follow? She had to put two and two together, and the answer wouldn’t come out orange blossom and Wedding March.

“Meanwhile, Anne Lamburn was getting a trifle restive with me. Had I or had I not met Lancelot?” Manganelle indulged in one of his patented, shifty grins. “I blarneyed her, said we’d spoken briefly, Lancelot and I, he’d been a typical British gent, tragic end, probably mistaken identity, and he was tragic victim of terrorism.”

Staring at him, I said, “You covered up for Harry Lamburn?”

Shrugging moodily, Manganelle countered, “I couldn’t prove anything beyond a strong smell. Why get the wretched woman

worked up? It was painfully obvious that, twit or no, she’d thought the world of Lancelot Pasover, and I saw no good in presenting her with the nightmare that she was living with his killer—who had killed for her, into the bargain.”

Manganelle sniggered bitterly. “Too late, old boy. Always engage brain before operating mouth . . . but what with the champagne and everything, I’d had to chat her up, and the goose was cooked.”

“How d’you mean?”

“Something in her eyes,” he said, pulling a face. “A glint putting me in mind of a cat at a mousehole, very strongly in mind of that. Disagreeably so, old boy. And the minute I ran out of soothing lies to make her feel better, she gave me a real sergeant-major’s look, a cut-the-crap look. Know what she said? ‘Why did you ask if Harry had ever been to Beirut?’ And then, no time for me to stick my oar in, she said, statement not question, ‘*You met him there.*’”

“Awkward,” I suggested.

“You spat a bootful. Let’s take a stroll, breath of fresh air on the prom.” Not Eric Manganelle’s style at all, leaving an unemptied glass.

It was a gorgeous night, black velvet sky, pumpkin moon, air like warm milk and fairylights twinkling their reflections

across the placid sea. From the shadow came the singing of cicadas: in reality the scrape of alloy on asphalt as geriatric strollers deployed their walking frames.

"Women have bouts of ESP," Manganelle argued. "I never said a word about seeing her husband, both of them in fact, present and future tenses as it were, in the same place at the same time. But she . . . she picked up that thought and drew it out of my head like pulling silk from a silkworm."

I had to laugh. "She wouldn't need ESP! You're tactful as a bull elephant and transparent as cellophane, two minutes of your so-called soothing lies and Mrs. Lamburn was bound to smell a rat."

Out of character, he took that passively. "Possibly, possibly; 'pon my word, though, I tried to act for the best." He sounded so subdued that I nagged.

"You're keeping something back."

Manganelle gave me a sideways look blending shame, pride, and sheer mischief. "Um, well, there's a *bit* more," he admitted coyly.

A suspicion was growing. "Hang on, exactly when was this conference where you met the lady?"

"Months back, half a year or more."

"So why are you here now?"

Eric Manganelle tried to look solemn, regretful. "I came down for the inquest, actually. Open and shut thing, over in minutes. Sad case, feller is up there on Hardpath Heights, sudden attack of vertigo, loving wife makes futile attempt to yank him back by the collar, just misses, and is left holding his toupee, rest of hubby three hundred feet below on the rocks.

"Verdict: misadventure. You could tell the coroner was quite smitten by the widow—but then there's nothing like designer mourning to complement a mature redhead."

We paused by mutual consent and watched serene Palmcastle, where nothing happens because that is what Palmcastle is for. "She killed him, *executed* him, and you are letting her get away with it," I accused.

Manganelle simpered and pursed his lips. "Two wrongs can make a right is the way I prefer to see it. Impulse, old boy: the moment of unbearable temptation. We all know about that, generally from standing outside a pub, sixty seconds before opening time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Harry Lamburn found himself in Beirut with Lancelot Pasover, whom he saw—correctly, as events proved—as the only barrier be-

tween himself and the love of his life. What's more, Pasover was ripe for the zapping, in the world capital of random violence. Where d'you hide a leaf but the forest? Where d'you hide a murder but jolly old downtown West Beirut? Unbearable temptation.

"Same thing goes for Anne Lamburn. I blurted something out and she made inquiries and was morally certain that she'd married a murderer. The Lamburns liked going to that cliff-top, she told me so. Unbearable temptation Part Two, Mr. Lamburn tries parachuteless sky-diving." Manganelle drew himself up, or at least puffed harder and pushed his paunch out. "Don't go preaching at me

—if you think I had no proof about Lamburn giving poor Lance the chop, there's even less against the repetitive widow, Mrs. L. I was at the inquest, heard the witnesses. Graphic evidence that onlookers can't tell the difference between a grab and a shove."

"All the same, you should go to the police, get the investigation reopened, the inquest verdict set aside. I'm sure there is a procedure for that."

Eric Manganelle drew himself up to his full five three or thereabouts, toadly countenance florid with righteous indignation. "Bite your tongue! *Me*, make trouble for a poor, lone, widow-woman? I never make trouble for anyone!"

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House #2: lackey

House #3: dickey

House #4: monkey

House #5: jockey

House #6: pokey

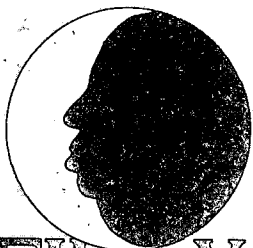
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MYSTERY CLASSIC

==Footprints==

==by Karel Čapek==

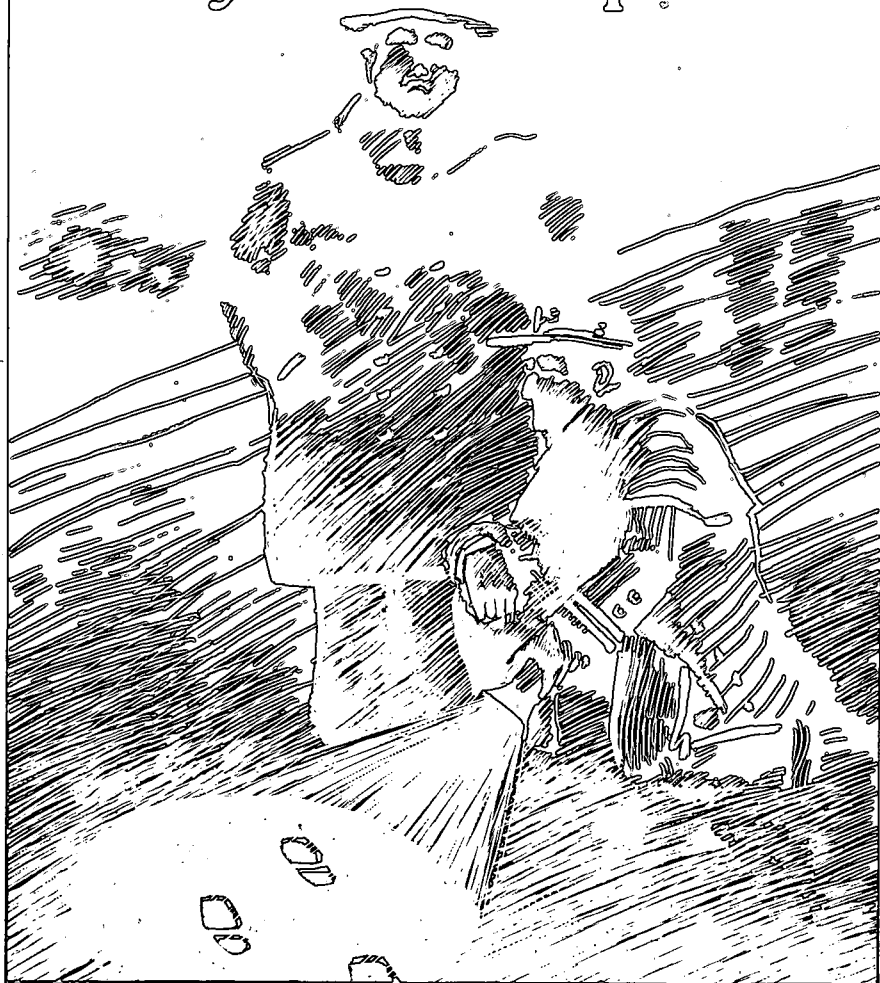


Illustration by Timothy Foley

That night Mr. Rybka was walking home in a particularly good mood. First, because he'd won his game of chess (it was a fine checkmate with a knight, and he was reveling in it), and second because fresh snow had fallen and it crunched under his feet in the pure, quiet air. God, how beautiful it all is, thought Mr. Rybka; a town covered with snow suddenly becomes such a small, old fashioned place—a person can almost imagine a mail-coach or a squad of nightwatchmen coming down the street. It's strange how snow makes everything look ancient and rustic.

Crunch, crunch, Mr. Rybka searched for an untrammelled path, delighting in the crunch he made; since he lived on a quiet back alley, he came upon fewer and fewer footprints. Look, in the courtyard, a man's boots and a woman's shoes were fading fast, most likely husband and wife—"I wonder if they're newlyweds?" Mr. Rybka said softly, as if he wanted to bless them. Over there, a cat crossed the path and left its pawprints, like flowers, in the snow. Goodnight, pussier, how cold your feet will get! Already now just a single row of footprints, deep, a man's, a straight and clear chain of steps which a lone pedestrian had rolled out behind him. Which of his neighbors was he at? Mr. Rybka asked with the concern of a friend. Few people walked there—there wasn't a single track in the snow—we live on the margin of life. By the time I reach home, the street will have pulled its featherbed up to its nose, like a child's plaything. It's too bad that in the morning the old newspaper lady will trample all over it, her footprints crisscrossing like a hare's—

Mr. Rybka stopped suddenly: on the verge of crossing the bright white street to his gate, he saw that there were footprints ahead of his and that they turned from the sidewalk and headed across the street to his gate. Who would be going to my house? he asked, puzzled, and with his eyes he followed the conspicuous footprints. There were five of them, and right in the middle of the street they came to an end with the sharp impression of a left foot. There weren't any more, just unbroken, untouched snow.

This is crazy, Mr. Rybka said to himself—perhaps the fellow went back to the sidewalk! But as far as he could see, the sidewalk was nothing but smooth, deep snow, without a single human footprint. Well, I'll be damned—Mr. Rybka was shocked—but of course, the next footprint will be on the other sidewalk! And so he walked

Translated by Robert Wechsler and Peter Kussi. © 1990 Robert Wechsler and Peter Kussi. Originally published as "Štěpeje" in Povidky z jedné kapsy (Tales from One Pocket), 1929. First English translation.

a circuit around the untouched prints, but on the other sidewalk too he didn't find a single mark. The entire street glowed from the smooth, untouched snow, so pure it took his breath away. No one had passed that way from the moment the snow began to fall. "It's curious," Mr. Rybka muttered, most likely the fellow walked backwards back to the sidewalk, stepping in his own footsteps; but he would have had to have walked backwards in his footsteps all the way to the corner, since there was only one set of prints. But why would the fellow do such a thing?—Mr. Rybka was astonished—and could he really have hit the mark *every* time?

Shaking his head he unlocked the gate and went into his house. Although he knew it was nonsense, he wondered if *inside* his house he'd find some snowy footprints. But it stands to reason there was nothing of the kind! "Perhaps it was just my imagination," Mr. Rybka muttered anxiously, and then he leaned out the window. On the street, in the gleam of the street lights, he could clearly see five sharp, deep footprints that ended in the middle of the street, and then nothing. Damn—Mr. Rybka thought and he rubbed his eyes—once I read a yarn about a single footprint in the snow, but here there's a whole row of them, and then suddenly nothing . . . what's become of the fellow?

Shaking his head he began to undress, but suddenly he stopped, went to the telephone, and in a subdued voice called the police station: "Hello, Sergeant Bartosek? Such a peculiar thing has happened, *most* peculiar—If you'd send someone here, or even better, come yourself—Wonderful, I'll wait for you at the corner. I don't know *what* the matter is—No, I don't think it's dangerous; I just don't want anyone to tread on those footprints—I don't know *whose* footprints! Fine, I'll be waiting for you."

Mr. Rybka dressed and went out again; cautiously he walked around the footprints and took care not to disturb them, even on the sidewalk. Shaking with cold and excitement, he waited at the corner for Sergeant Bartosek. It was quiet, and the inhabited earth shone peacefully out into space.

"It's so nice and quiet here," Sergeant Bartosek muttered pensively. "And what do I get but a fight and a drunk. Phooey! —So what happened?"

"Take a good look at these footprints, sergeant," Mr. Rybka said in a quivering voice. "They start from here."

The sergeant turned on his flashlight. "He's a lanky sort of guy,"

he surmised, "about five feet eleven inches, according to the impressions and the length of the stride. His shoes were decent, hand-sewn, I think. He wasn't drunk and he walked rather briskly. I don't know what it is about the footprints you don't like."

"That," Mr. Rybka said succinctly, and he pointed to the incomplete row of footprints in the middle of the street.

"Aha," Sergeant Bartosek responded, and without much ceremony he headed for the last footprint, crouched down, and shone his flashlight. "It's nothing," he said with satisfaction; "it's quite normal, a good solid imprint. The weight is on the heel; if the man had taken another step or jumped, the weight would have transferred to his toes, you follow? It's obvious."

"So it means—?" Mr. Rybka asked expectantly.

"In short," the sergeant said calmly, "it means that he didn't go any farther."

"Then where did he go?" Rybka blurted out feverishly.

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Perhaps you suspect him of something?"

"Suspect him?" Mr. Rybka was astonished. "All I want to know is where he was headed. Look, here's where he made his last impression; where, for Christ's sake, did he make the next? There simply aren't any more footprints!"

"I can see that," the sergeant said dryly. "And what is it to you where he was going? Is it someone from your house? Is someone missing? What the hell difference is it to you where he was headed?"

"But there must be some explanation," Mr. Rybka mumbled. "Don't you think it might be possible that he went backwards in his own footprints?"

"Nonsense," the sergeant growled. "When a man walks backwards, he takes shorter steps and he walks with his feet farther apart to keep his balance. In addition, he doesn't lift his legs and with his heels he digs great trenches in the snow. Sir, this imprint here was made by just one step. You must admit that the prints are sharp."

"Then if he didn't go back," Mr. Rybka stubbornly insisted, "*where did he disappear to?*"

"That's his affair," the sergeant growled. "Look here, if he did nothing wrong, we have no right to meddle in his affairs. We must have some charges; then, of course, we will take him in for questioning"

"But what if a man disappears right in the middle of a street?" Mr. Rybka was appalled.

"Sir, you must be patient," the sergeant calmly advised him. "If someone has disappeared, we'll hear in the next few days from his family or someone else, yes, of course, and then we'll start our search. As long as no one misses him, then we have nothing to do with it. It's none of our business."

Inside Mr. Rybka a dark anger was beginning to rise. "I beg your pardon," he stated sharply, "but I would say that the police should take a *little* interest when an innocent pedestrian disappears, out of the blue, in the middle of the street!"

"Nothing bad happened here," Sergeant Bartosek tried to console him. "There certainly aren't any signs of struggle. If someone had held him up or abducted him, then there would be a mess of footprints. I'm sorry, sir, but I have insufficient cause to intervene."

"But, sergeant," Mr. Rybka threw up his hands, "at least explain to me . . . It's still such a mystery . . ."

"It is," Sergeant Bartosek agreed, deep in thought. "You don't have the ghost of an idea how many mysteries there are in the world. Every house, every family is a mystery. As I was coming here, there in that building I heard a young woman sobbing. Sir, mysteries are none of our concern. We're paid to keep the peace. What do you think, that we chase thieves out of curiosity? Sir, we chase them in order to lock them up. There must be law and order."

"Exactly!" Mr. Rybka exclaimed. "But you must acknowledge that there's no law and order when in the middle of the street someone . . . let's say someone rises straight up into the sky."

"It's a matter of interpretation," said the sergeant. "It's a police regulation that if a man is in danger of falling from a great height, we have to tie him up. First comes the warning, and then the penalty. If this man rose into the sky of his own volition, then a police officer would have to advise him to buckle his safety belt; but perhaps no officer was present here," he said apologetically. "Or there would be footprints alongside these. However, in any event, it is possible that the man left the scene by some other means, right?"

"But how?" Mr. Rybka said quickly.

Sergeant Bartosek shook his head. "It's hard to say. Perhaps it was some sort of Assumption or Jacob's Ladder," he said uncertainly. "The Assumption would have been considered a kidnapping if there were any signs of violence; but ordinarily it's done with

the victim's acquiescence. It's possible that the fellow might have flown away. Doesn't it sometimes seem to you as if you were flying? All a man has to do is push off with his feet and he's airborne. . . . Some fly like a balloon, but me, when I fly in my sleep, I have to keep pushing off from the ground every few moments. I think it's due to my heavy clothing and my saber. Perhaps the fellow was sleeping and in his sleep he began to fly. But that's not prohibited. Of course, on a busy street an officer would have to give him a warning. Or wait, perhaps he was levitating; spiritualists believe in levitation. But spiritualism, too, is not prohibited. A certain Mr. Baudys told me that he himself has seen mediums hanging in thin air. Who knows what's in it."

"But, sergeant," Mr. Rybka said reproachfully, "I don't think you believe what you're saying! Those things would be such a grave violation of natural law—"

Sergeant Bartosek shrugged his shoulders dispiritedly. "Sir, I know that people violate every conceivable law and statute; if you were a police officer, you'd see so much of it . . ." The sergeant waved his hands as if waving it all away. "It wouldn't surprise me if they violated even natural laws. People are a rotten lot, sir. Well, goodnight; it's freezing out here."

"Won't you come in and have a cup of tea . . . or slivovitz?" Mr. Rybka suggested.

"Why not," the sergeant growled despondently. "You know, in this uniform a man can't even go into a bar. That's why policemen drink so little."

"Mystery," he continued, seated in an easy chair and thoughtfully contemplating a speck of snow thawing on the tip of his boot. "Ninety-nine people would pass those footprints without noticing a thing. And you don't notice ninety-nine things that are damned mysterious. We don't know a damned thing about. . . . But there are a few things that aren't mysterious. Order is not mysterious. Justice is not mysterious. Policemen are not mysterious. But each man who walks along a street is a mystery, because we can't get at him, sir. As soon as he steals something, then he ceases to be mysterious, because we lock him up and that's that; at least we know what he's doing, and whenever we want we watch him through the window in his cell, right? I ask you, why do papers print headlines like, 'Mysterious Discovery of a Corpse!' What's mysterious about a corpse? When we find it, we measure it and photograph it and cut it up; we know every fiber in it, the last meal

it ate, how it died, and what not. Moreover, we know that, most likely, someone slaughtered it for money. It's all clear and straightforward. . . . You can pour me a good bit more of that black tea, sir. All crimes are clear, sir; at least you know the criminal's motives and things like that. But what your cat is thinking, that's a mystery; or what your maid dreams about, and why your wife stares out the window so pensively. Sir, everything is mysterious except criminal proceedings; every criminal case is a precisely determined portion of reality, a well-illuminated slice of life. If I were to look around here, I'd learn a lot about you, but I'm looking at the toes of my boots, because officially I have no interest in you. That is, we don't have any charges against you," he added, sipping his scalding hot tea.

"It's a rather peculiar notion," he began again after a short pause, "that the police, especially detectives, are interested in mysteries. We don't give a damn about mysteries; improprieties are what interest us. Sir, crime doesn't interest us because it's mysterious, but because it's forbidden. We don't chase a crook out of intellectual curiosity; we chase him in order to arrest him in the name of the law. Listen, streetcleaners don't sweep streets in order to search the dust for signs of people's footprints, but in order to sweep up and clear away all the filth that life deposits there. Order is not a bit mysterious. To keep order is lousy work, sir; whoever wants cleanliness must put his fingers into all sorts of filth. But someone has to do it," he said despondently, "just as someone has to slaughter calves. But to slaughter a calf out of curiosity is barbaric; it must be done only for the sake of one's trade. If a man has an obligation to do something, then at least he knows that it's the right thing to do. Look, justice must be as indisputable as a multiplication table. I certainly don't know if you could claim that every theft is wrong, but I'll prove to you that every theft is forbidden, by simply locking you up. If you cast pearls on the street, then a policeman will give you a warning about littering the street. But if you start performing miracles, then we can't stop you from doing it, unless we were to call it a public nuisance or an illegal gathering of people. There must be some sort of disorderly conduct for us to intervene."

"But, sergeant," objected Mr. Rybka, fidgeting uneasily, "is that enough for you? Here it's a matter of . . . of such a peculiar thing . . . of something so mysterious . . . and you . . ."

Sergeant Bartosek shrugged his shoulders. "And I just let it go."

Sir, if you'd like I will have the footprints removed so that they don't interfere with your peace of mind tonight. I can't do any more. Don't you hear something? Some footsteps? Well, there goes our patrol, so it's been two hours and seven minutes. Goodnight, sir."

Mr. Rybka accompanied the sergeant out to his gate. In the middle of the street there was still an incomplete and incomprehensible chain of footprints— An officer was approaching on the opposite sidewalk.

"Mimra," Sergeant Bartosek called out, "anything new?"

Officer Mimra saluted. "Not much at all, sergeant," he called. "Over there, in front of No. 17, a kitten was meowing, so I rang the bell to let it in. At No. 9 they left the gate open. At the corner, they dug up the street, but failed to leave a red lantern, and at Marsik's grocery one side of a sign was coming off; it must be removed in the morning so that it doesn't fall on somebody's head."

"That's all?"

"That's all," said Officer Mimra. "In the morning I'll have to throw sand on the sidewalks so that nobody breaks his leg; and at six o'clock we should really ring all the doorbells—"

"Excellent," said Sergeant Bartosek. "Goodnight!"

Mr. Rybka took one last look at the footprints that had led into the unknown. But there, where the last footprint had been, were the two large imprints of Officer Mimra's workboots, and from there the wide footprints went off in a clear and regular chain.

"Good riddance," Mr. Rybka sighed, and he went to bed.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Illustration by Patricia Olstad

Mary Bowen Hall has written a first in a series about Emma Chizzit, who cleans out old, abandoned, and about-to-be demolished houses for a living, salvaging and restoring what might be salable as well. But when Emma finds the mummified body of a baby under the porch of an abandoned Queen Anne, soon to be demolished in favor of a condominium development in the Coast Range of California, she becomes embroiled in detection. Particularly charming is Emma's relationship with her neighbor and landlady Frannie and the lovestruck cop Riley. **Emma Chizzit and the Queen Anne Killer** (Walker, \$17.95, 178 pp) is a fun introduction to an interesting amateur detective.

Hector Belascoarán Shayne is a private investigator who shares office space with a sewer expert, an upholsterer, and a plumber in Mexico City. He loves the city, his family, and his officemates. He even loves his work—at least it fits in with his leftist leanings more than his former occupation as engineer. Belascoarán Shayne has been hired to investigate the suspected suicide attempt by a teenage girl, the murder of an engineer in the suburbs—and the disappearance of Emiliano Zapata! At the same time, he and his brother and sister have to deal with the death of their mother, their father's shady past, and an inheritance none of them wants. **An Easy Thing** (Viking, \$16.95, 230 pp) is the first of the works by Paco Ignacio Taibo II to be translated in the United States. Lots

of atmosphere and a very likeable hardboiled private eye make this a welcome debut.

Ex-football star turned private eye Moroni Traveler lives and works in Salt Lake City. And while he carries the name of the angel atop the temple in this Mormon city, Traveler is not a believer in the Mormon faith. That makes it particularly difficult for him when his old school friend, an official in the church, hires him to investigate the disappearance of the wife of a church elder. Especially since the woman's daughter had hired him first. **Baptism for the Dead** (Pocket Books, \$3.95, 230 pp) by Robert Irvine presents a believable picture of what life might be like for a non-believer in a religious state and presents it against well-drawn winter Utah scenery. Traveler is a particularly likeable character, as is his father, but the unsympathetic portrayal of the Mormon religion may offend some.

L. R. Wright's Mountie, Karl Allberg, returns in **A Chill Rain in January** (Viking, \$17.95, 280 pp). But this time the book takes several other points of view. We see the story unfold through the eyes of Zoe Strachan, who is being blackmailed by her ne'er-do-well brother, and of Ramona Orlitski, elderly runaway from a nursing care facility. Karl is looking for Ramona, as are most of the other residents of Sèchelt on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, and all three are drawn together when Zoe's brother is found dead at the foot of her cellar stairs. Especially effective are the passages told in Ramona's voice, wherein she befriends Zoe's orphaned nephew.

Dan Kruger is a private investigator in Chicago. In the third in Michael Cormany's series, **Rich or Dead** (Birch Lane Press, \$15.95, 189 pp), he is investigating the disappearance of Elvia Reyes' brother. Elvia, an illegal alien, can't go to the police; besides, she really doesn't want to find her brother, just the money he stole from her that she stole from her employer, etc. Tracing this missing money, Kruger stumbles into a world of smuggling illegal aliens and drugs, murder and street gangs, all hidden behind the facade of Chicago business and politics.

Rachel Starr is a beautiful woman, a loner who doesn't trust anyone, and a policewoman in Los Angeles. When her ex-partner is killed during a covert and unauthorized investigation, Rachel decides to investigate on her own. Paired with Nicholas Snow, noted art professor, collector, and suspected thief, she goes to Honolulu to trace a Chinese jewel fence and dope smuggler. Lue Zimelman's **Honolulu Red** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 245 pp) is introduced

as a Rachel Starr mystery, but we learn as much about Snow in the course of this cross between caper and police "nonprocedural."

Eyes in the Fire (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 250 pp) by Deborah Gra-bien partakes of the occult. Marian and Julian Dunne are successful and comfortable, living in their dream home in Dartmoor. But when inexplicable events claim the life of a local librarian, Marian, Julian, and their daughter Gemma begin to investigate. Celtic prehistory blends with modern-day parapsychology to provide a suspenseful story about mysterious "hauntings" on the moors.

Aileen Macklin is a psychiatrist who has had a less than stable psychiatric history herself. When Gary Dunn appears on the scene, claiming falsely to be mentally ill, Aileen is carried back into her turbulent past—Gary reminds her strongly of her former lover. Told in alternating chapters—Aileen's voice for the present and Gary's voice for the past events leading up to their meeting—**The Tryst** by Michael Dibdin (Summit, \$17.95, 168 pp) telegraphs the inevitable dread and suspense as Aileen is drawn into Gary's case and life.

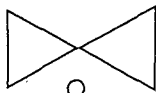
Ex-coroner Thomas T. Noguchi, M. D., and Arthur Lyons have coauthored a second in the series about ex-coroner Dr. Eric Parker: **Physical Evidence** (G. P. Putnam's Sons, \$19.95, 256 pp). In this one, a daughter hires Parker to investigate the death of her mother, whose head was subsequently removed and frozen "for future revival." Naturally, an autopsy without the head is difficult, and the woman's son will not authorize an investigation. But Parker begins to suspect something when he meets the owner of the cryogenics facility, the son, and various other employees. Graphic and grisly details about autopsies are provided in the course of the story, and this may turn off the sensitive reader.

Robert Eversz has written **False Profit** (Viking, \$16.95, 170 pp), a sequel to his *Bottom Line Is Murder*, starring corporate investigator Paul Marston and martial arts expert Angel Cantini. In *False Profit*, Paul and Angel are investigating the death by "par-boiling" of a junk bonds broker Jack Burns. Burns had hired Paul and Angel as bodyguards after he had received threats on his life, but he had fired them both prior to his death. While Burns was not a likeable client, and while his death cannot be blamed on their agency, Paul and Angel feel obliged to trace the events leading to this "accident." Eversz' own background as a marketing consultant in Southern California lends particular credence to the corporate backgrounds in this mystery.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Michael Boll is a star in his high-powered office. He lives in a modern apartment straight from the pages of a high-tech decorating magazine, complete with the latest in electronic wizardry. He's got a perfect fiancée — bright, pretty, wealthy—who proudly tells him, "You're not even thirty and you're going to be named senior analyst." He wears the right clothes, he does the right things. Yet something is troubling our hero.

Alex, although he uses several different names, is a young man who seemingly has no background, no attachments, no responsibility. And, we find out, he has no morality.

When these two opposites come together, we get a bang which is the psychological thriller **Bad Influence**. Rob Lowe is the steely-eyed, tight-

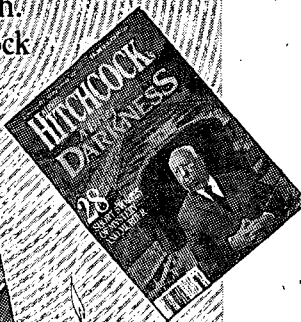
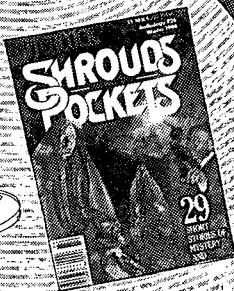
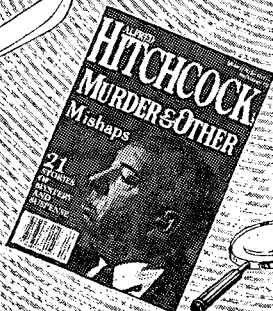
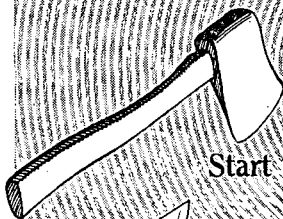
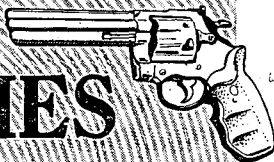
lipped Alex, who attaches himself to Michael's life and goes for a wild ride. James Spader plays Michael, who, through doubts about himself, allows this mysterious new friend to lead him into things he would never have considered on his own.

The two meet in a beach bar where Michael has gone to mull over his troubles—his promotion is in peril due to sabotage by a competitor. He isn't sure about his impending marriage.

Alex happens upon the scene just as our hero finds himself about to be trounced by a local bully. He threatens the bully with a broken beer bottle and saves the day.

They cement their friendship by making the rounds of an unusual L.A. club scene. This is where Alex is at home, with strange passwords to get through closed doors, patrons of

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questionable sexuality, and something sinister in the air. To Michael, inexperienced in that darker lifestyle, it's an initiation into something new and exciting.

Alex, sensing Michael's vulnerability, almost flirtingly suggests ways for him to get what he wants, or get rid of what he doesn't want. He persuades him to use nefarious means to get his promotion—fight sabotage with sabotage. And, in a funny scene involving a videotape, Alex ends any talk of marriage by getting Michael's prospective father-in-law to chase him out of his palatial house.

At first Michael enjoys his friend's shenanigans and finds his participation in them exhilarating. The parties, the women, the drugs are thrilling. But when Michael awakens one morning from a drunken stupor, with blood on his hands, and finds out that his office competitor was the victim of a brutal beating the night before, he begins to wonder if things have gotten out of hand.

By the time he realizes this, it's already too late. Alex refuses to let go so easily and wants to see his friend pay for what he has done for him—for

giving him what he said he wanted. It's as if Michael had made a pact with the devil.

With the stage thus set, *Bad Influence* becomes a real thriller, bringing to mind Hitchcock's 1951 film, *Strangers on a Train*.

Our hero is forced to cover up a murder he didn't commit because his evil friend can convincingly frame him for it. Hitchcock's killer had a cigarette lighter for a prop to frame his friend; in *Bad Influence* it's Michael's jacket which he is desperate to recover.

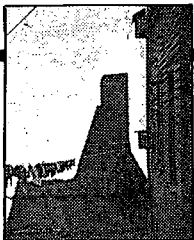
In his confusion about himself, Michael even ends up relying on his brother Pismo, a sixties dropout who served time for a drug rap and who's been hiding from the world ever since. At the beginning of the movie, it was the other way around.

In his role as the bad guy, Lowe exudes evil, but with cocky self-assurance. Spader makes the transition from straight-arrow to creepy night-crawler convincingly. And when he sees he's done wrong, he's believable in that.

Although setting the stage in *Bad Influence* seems to take a long time, it's a worthwhile trip leading to a final, suspenseful ride to an exciting conclusion.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photographic contest was won by Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California. Honorable mentions go to Kenneth W. Curt Fischer of Sheboygan, Wisconsin; J. F. Peirce of La Barge, Wyoming; J. F. Peirce of Illinois; J. F. Peirce of Guercio of Royal Palm Beach, Florida; Chas. A. McArthur of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; and Larry Preece of Anaheim, California.



tograph contest was won by Wanda Va-Richard J. Lynch of Wheel-Bryan, Texas; Michael Del Beach, Florida; Chas. A. Mc-

OLD FASHIONED JUSTICE by Virginia Thompson

Tiny old Mrs. Lorenzo attached the broad hem of her bathrobe to the only clothesline left between the two buildings. Mr. Kline's window, directly opposite, snapped open.

"Take that ugly rag inside! Put it in a drier like a civilized person!" he shouted.

"I have a right to hang laundry, Mr. Kline."

"You don't have a right to spoil my view!"

"A brick wall on the fifth floor is a view? Today's Labor Day. Go to the country like the other tenants."

He pulled viciously on the line.

"Don't touch my robe. Judge Cohen said you may not cut the line, remove clothes, drop them in the alley, or spray-paint them again."

"You stubborn eighty-year-old woman. You belong in a nursing home, not the twentieth century. I'll see the new young judge!"

He yanked on the closest end of the bathrobe. It resisted. Puzzled, he leaned farther out and yanked harder with both hands. Mrs. Lorenzo yanked sharply back on her end of the line. Five stories later Mr. Kline met his Maker.

Mrs. Lorenzo snipped the threads that had sewn the bathrobe to the rope. She repaired a tear with her treadle machine and rubbed a grease spot in soothing, sudsy foam on her metal washboard. She sniffed hand-kneaded hot bread and looked lovingly at her sparkling hand-scrubbed apartment.

She appreciated her strong arms and hands as they rehung the robe to dry.

Yes, she reflected, old fashioned ways are best.

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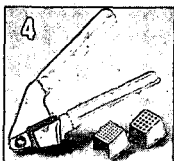
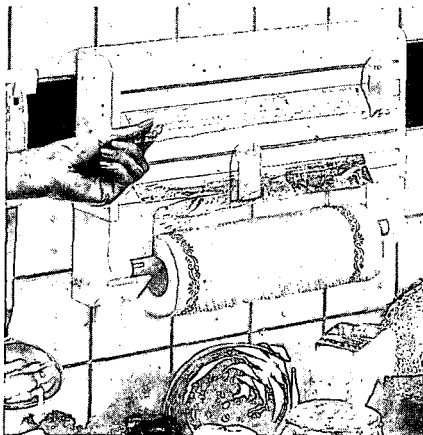
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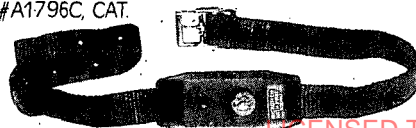


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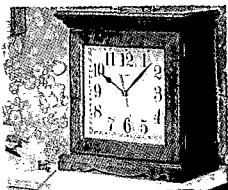
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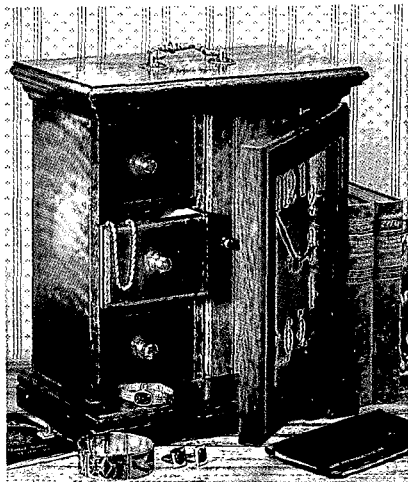


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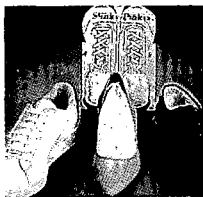


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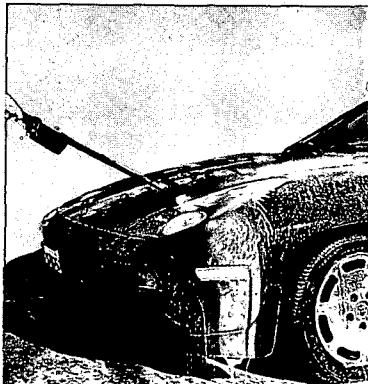
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